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# UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE READINESS AND THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTH TEXAS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERS AND PARENTS IN THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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# Dedication

This treatise is dedicated to all my teachers both inside and outside of the classroom, and to my parents, Sarah C. Johnson and the late Ben L. Johnson.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge of the members of my committee; Dr. John Roueche, Dr. Ed Sharpe, Dr. Lisa Cary, Dr. Shirley Reed, and Dr. Margaretha Bischoff. I cannot say enough about these individuals. They are my friends and mentors and I could write pages about the impact that they have had on my professional career and my thinking about educational leadership, the community college, and educational research.

I wish to also acknowledge the educational professionals and parents who participated in the interviews and focus groups for this project. I hope in some small way that the findings of this treatise may benefit all students and educators in South Texas.

To my CCLP block, thank you for bearing with me and helping me. Steven Gonzalez, Alison Weirs, and Martha Munoz were especially close and supportive during this remarkable journey. Linda Garcia is first among equals. More than her intellect and ability is her good nature and her kindness. I can never thank her enough.

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My family in California has always been there for me. If not for the love and support of my mother, Sarah C. Johnson, and my father, the late Ben L. Johnson, I could not have achieved any professional or academic accomplishments.

# UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE READINESS AND THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTH TEXAS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERS AND PARENTS IN THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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The researcher/writer of this treatise has used qualitatively based data to develop a better understanding of the perceptions of college readiness initiatives in three public school districts in the service area of a community college in South Texas. The researcher has also used these methods to understand the perceptions of participants in a community based parental outreach program about the subject of college readiness. More specifically, through the use interviews with public school district superintendents, focus groups with educational professionals in the corresponding school districts, and similar

focus group interviews with the parent/facilitators in the outreach group; critical issues, incidents, and events have been identified to improve and better inform the processes of college readiness initiatives for the college. The end product of this treatise will help both the researcher/practitioner and the leadership of the college improve their educational service to the community, and add new voices to the character of this service. The researcher as an *outsider* to the language and culture of the region, has also reflected on his positionality and professional growth within this community through these processes.

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# CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

This is a study of building relationships between the secondary and post-secondary levels of the American educational system. More specifically, this treatise will focus on the factors that inform collaborative relationships between a Hispanic serving community college, high schools, and the families of potential students in its service area. The development of a better understanding of public school perceptions of college readiness as well as the college readiness perceptions of members of a specific family outreach group will be the goal of this treatise. How the community college fits within these perceptions will help inform the development of future college readiness initiatives at the college. While I will not focus on the students themselves or related curricular questions, no discussion in this area would be complete without at least some mention of positive student outcomes, the composition of the student population, and curricular changes; all of which are integral to college readiness based college/high-school collaborations. Similarly, despite the importance of the debate about standardization and college readiness assessment, the assessment instruments and their validity will not be the focus of this research. Instead, this investigation will lead community college leaders to a better understanding of the public schools and families from whence their students come. I will use an action research case study methodology from three perspectives (elite interviews, public school curricular leader focus groups, and focus groups with parental outreach facilitators) to develop a better understanding of collaborative efforts between the community college and the public schools in its service area in the domain of student preparation for higher level study (referred to henceforth as *college readiness* and *college readiness initiatives*). This three pronged approach will also be used to develop a better

understanding of student population and families served by the college. I have chosen this methodology because of my personal history that includes nine years of service as a faculty member at South Texas College (STC) and my familiarity with the organization of the college. As an *insider* I will be part of what Herr and Anderson (2005) term a collective inquiry into the issue of college readiness of the college's potential student population. I will provide a more in depth discussion of my positionality below.

The greater understanding of the community served by the college that I will generate with this research will be part of the improvement of on-going college readiness initiatives at STC, with possible insights for other community colleges with similar environmental, demographic, and organizational characteristics.

Another implication of this treatise involves the Hispanic serving character of the college and schools to be studied.[1] The importance of *familism* and an understanding of the development of social and educational capital in this population for student success (Valenzuela & Dornbusch 1994; Valenzuela 1999) should be among the goals of college readiness initiatives to be informed by this study. Observations and analyses of college readiness workshops for families of an on-going family based organization in the service area of the community college can provide insights for similarly placed colleges and schools. An understanding family based meetings and workshops will also fit well with the action research orientation of this dissertation.

[1] In this treatise I will use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* in their singular and plural forms interchangeably. I acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of this ethnic group within the United States and that individuals who identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino may be of any racial group and may have self identified ethnic heritage that is political, regional, and or national; for example, Chicano/a, Mexican-American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Guatemalan etc. I, therefore, acknowledge the limitations of the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino*, but will use them for purposes of practicality. This acknowledgment statement is based on a similar statement found in Laden (2004), p. 181.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research problems for this treatise concern both practical questions to better inform the development of a college readiness initiative between the college, high schools in its service area, and the prospective student population and their families; as well as theoretical questions relating to policy implementation and perceptions of the community college by educational leaders at the secondary level.

At the practical level, given the complex organizational and external environment of the modern, comprehensive community college; what will a college readiness initiative at a specific college look like? What can the college do to better prepare prospective high school students to be college ready? What new procedures and processes will have to be developed to engage in this undertaking? Finally, given the Hispanic serving character of STC, what specific new knowledge can be gained from outreach efforts specifically targeted at the families of these prospective students? To better inform the answers to these questions of implementation, this treatise will look at six fundamental research questions:

## SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Specific research questions to be addressed in this treatise are:

1. What are the factors that emerge from the data that can inform collaboration between a community college and select public school systems in the college's service area as these organizations work together to improve the process of better preparing high school students for college level work?

2. How do public school superintendents and other public school administrators perceive and make meaning of the issue of college readiness and how do these perceptions qualitatively vary across communities within an ethnically homogenous, yet economically diverse region of Texas?
3. What are the perceptions of the community college by public school leaders, and how do these perceptions influence their responses to college readiness policy directives?
4. How do parental facilitators and participants of and within a family outreach group in this region perceive the importance of college readiness and are there qualitative differences between familial perceptions of college readiness and those of educational professionals? If so, how can these familial perceptions inform decision making at educational administrative levels? What matters most to parents of this region in the education of their children? This data can also be used to look for qualitative variations in these perceptions across an ethnically homogeneous region. It is important to note that *ethnically homogeneous* does not imply homogeneity across other demographic factors like socio-economic status. Also, within the school districts and the college service area that provide the geographic boundaries of this study there are, of course, students of various non-Hispanic racial and ethnic groups.
5. How can I as a researcher positioned inside the community college and already working on the issue of college readiness learn and grow as a professional and learn more about a community that I am not part of culturally or linguistically?

6. How can the answers to these questions be used to help community college leaders develop a more effective college readiness initiative with the public schools in its service area?

In this chapter, and those that follow, I will explore these questions in greater detail, and given my position as an educator already working at STC, suggest an action research based case study as a pragmatic way to better understand these processes, and the families and students served by the college. In providing this understanding, it is hoped the college can better serve its students and its community through the expansion of educational opportunities in the area of college readiness and preparation.

## DEFINING COLLEGE READINESS

The term *college readiness* is used to denote efforts to raise levels of student preparation for collegiate levels of academic work. Conley (2005) makes an important distinction between *college-eligible* and *college-ready*. Most American high schools focus on making students college eligible or able to meet college admissions requirements by taking courses prescribed by college admissions policies (Conley 2005, p. xi). There is no guarantee that these students are college-ready, or that they possess the cognitive skills necessary to meet the intellectual requirements and expectations of college level courses and faculty (ibid). At a curricular level, according to Conley, even college preparatory high school courses do not always progressively link knowledge and cognitive skills as students progress from one level of secondary education to the next (Conley 2005).

Kathleen Byrd and Ginger MacDonald (2005) have defined college readiness as a prediction based on placement tests, and more complex factors of student behavior, student personality, and knowledge that students possess of academic and collegiate culture. Their research among a population of non-traditional community college students in remedial education programs has shown that student college readiness is a combination of academic skills, personal skills like time management, background factors, goal orientation, and the self-esteem and psychological locus of control among these students.

While Byrd and MacDonald's focus was on older, non-traditional community college students, their findings in the non-curricular aspects of student college readiness are useful for the definition of college readiness I will use in this study.[2]

Taken together, Conley (2005) and Byrd and MacDonald (2005) imply that any college readiness program must seek to build academic and cognitive skills among college bound high school students, plus personal knowledge of the collegiate culture, and help develop enhancement attributes like time-management and goal orientation among potential students; what some have termed "college knowledge" (Conley 2005). The specific of details of the college readiness initiative at South Texas College (STC) are still evolving; reflective of the participatory and inductive nature of this research (Kemmis & McTaggert 2000). The program, in its initial stages, will focus on data

[2] There are also technical definitions of college readiness used by policymakers and educators in the various states. In Texas, for instance, a high school student is considered college ready if they score 2200 or higher on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in the subject areas of mathematics and English/language arts, with a score of 3 or higher on the written portion of the exam. A recent report by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, citing data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), indicates that in 2004, 56 percent of Texas high school graduates were college ready in mathematics and 36 percent were college ready in English/language arts based on these measures (Story 2006).

sharing between community college and high school administrators. Later on, possible directions that the initiative can go in might include a curricular dimension involving collaborative faculty meetings to better align curriculum, as well as family and community based "college knowledge" meetings and workshops.

Community colleges prepare students for academic transfer and direct entry into the workforce. Because of this, some may question if college readiness reforms have an even application to both sets of potential students. Even allowing for differences between college readiness for academic and technical programs; there is considerable evidence that academic college readiness and workforce preparation are synonymous as more and more jobs require "some college preparation" (Carnevale and Desrochers 2004). There is also evidence that at least 70 % of high school graduates are seeking some form of postsecondary education (Gilroy 2003). To not focus on developing a college readiness model that consolidates academic and workforce programmatic requirements into a single initiative would be a disservice to the vast majority of potential community college students.

## COLLEGE READINESS AND P-16 EDUCATIONAL REFORM

College readiness is a significant part of a larger educational reform movement that seeks to holistically integrate the American educational system between pre-school, elementary, middle school, secondary, and post-secondary levels. A range of educators and policy makers use the acronym P-16 (preschool [P] thru the four-year baccalaureate [16]) to refer to efforts "to infuse three largely disconnected levels of public education; preschool, K-12 (primary and secondary levels of public education) and postsecondary

higher education" into a more interconnected, more coherent, and more seamlessly aligned educational system (Van de Water and Rainwater 2001). P-16 initiatives are sometimes referred to as K-16 or P-20 in reference to a "start" point at the kindergarten primary grade (K-16) and an "end-point" at the graduate level of higher education (P-20). The American community college, with its commitment to open-door admissions and the democratization of higher education, is an important focal point of these reform efforts. Community colleges are institutionally in-between the student *sending* K-12 system, and the four-year college/university *receiving* end of the P-16 student pipeline (the latter process is also referred to as *forward transfer*), and are therefore vital to the success of these initiatives (Lundquist and Nixon 1998; Palmer 2000; Suarez 2003).

How educational organizations at distinct levels of a non-integrated educational system can "reconcile incongruities in policies and practices" is no easy question (Boswell 2000). Boswell (2000), although primarily concerned with the governmental/ policy dimension to these reforms, also notes that relationships can be based on dual enrollment programs. Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to receive high school and college credits through the same course (Robertson, Chapman, & Gaskin Eds. 2001). Dual enrollment programs are available to high school students who through grade point average and test scores are already determined to be college ready. Students in dual enrollment programs who are not college ready are, upon assessment, quickly transferred to non-dual credit high school classes.

Bragg (2000) has highlighted federally funded Tech-Prep *school to work* programs that encourage students to pursue technical careers through seamless transition (usually termed 2+2) from high school to college. Most of these programs are in applied

technical areas within the two-year community college. Again, college readiness and the numbers of students being assessed into developmental/remedial education is not an issue in Tech-Prep programs. It is important to note, however, that both dual enrollment and Tech-Prep programs can play an important "bridge building" role between community colleges and high schools (Bragg 2000). These programs help establish the professional and organizational relationships between institutions and build curricular articulation between educational systems (Bragg 2000). These relationships will be assets for colleges and schools seeking to establish broader, more holistic college readiness initiatives. Dual enrollment programs may contribute to what might be termed a "college going culture" in high schools. I will briefly explore this question in Chapter Two.

Collaborations between educational organizations are relational and must be based on positive values of trust and shared responsibility for students' success. They seek "to enable participants to achieve goals more successfully together than they could have separately" (Van de Water & Rainwater 2001, p. 22). P-16 reforms, and college-readiness initiatives are about building relationships and removing barriers for students; it is a waste of time for educational leaders to place blame across the levels of what has historically been a non-integrated educational system (the so-called "chain of blame"). In the words of John and Suanne Roueche (1999) when addressing college/high school collaboration: "Placing blame requires too much time and energy, and should be put aside in the interest of using time more wisely" (p. 48). Most educators and education policymakers care about student success, but in the present non-integrated system, some efforts are duplicated, some student needs are not met, and key pieces of information are

not exchanged between educational levels (*The Stanford Bridge Project: Executive Summary 2005*).

Synthesizing the literature on curricular integration and inter-organizational collaboration within the educational system, one can identify seven interrelated and overlapping dimensions that P-16 scholars and reformers consider significant:

1. A *policy dimension* to provide the formal-legal and fiscal support to the reforms. Governmental direction and budgetary support is vital to the success of P-16 initiatives (Boswell 2000; Orr & Bragg 2001; Kazis 2006; Palmer 2000; Tafel and Eberhart 1999; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005; Kisker 2006).

2. A *curricular dimension* to align curriculum in such a way that students build upon previous knowledge to make the transitions between educational levels a more seamless process (Conley 2005; Kazis 2006; Kirst & Venezia 2001; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar (Eds.) 2005; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005).

3. An *assessment dimension*. This aspect of P-16 focuses on the assessment instruments to ensure that the appropriate educational skills between educational levels can be measured. It is important that these measurements and related criteria for passing from one educational level to the next reflect the adequate knowledge and skills to make these transitions successful for students. This is especially true for the secondary/post-secondary transition. The interrelated processes within these transitions are often referred to as *college readiness* (Kazis 2006; Kirst & Venezia 2001; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar (Eds.) 2005; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005).

4. A *dimension of shared information and data* about student performance. Complementary information systems are a necessary part of the P-16 infrastructure. For instance, a lack of communication between educational levels prevents important information from reaching high school students about the cognitive skills and knowledge requirements of higher education, as well as the different types of assessment used to determine if students are college ready. Affective knowledge and socialization skills can also be incorporated in shared informational outreach efforts. Shared data for tracking student performance is also a vital component of determining benchmarks, milestones and other associated measures to critically evaluate a P-16 initiative (Boswell 2000; Conley 2005; Kazis 2006; Tafel & Eberhart 1999; Van de Water and Rainwater 2001; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005).

5. A *public school teacher preparation* dimension. Higher education and K-12 schools are mutually dependent in the area of teacher preparation and training. Colleges and universities train future K-12 teachers, and elementary, middle, and secondary schools provide sites for teacher practice and student teaching (Van de Water and Rainwater 2001). As high schools increase their academic rigor, the need for better qualified

teachers, particularly in math, science, English and special education (professionals already in alarmingly short supply) will increase (Haycock 2001). Inculcating shared values regarding a more integrated educational system should be a part of all teacher preparation programs.

6. An *organizational and inter-organizational dimension* that reflects the changes in organizational structure and leadership necessary at the level of the schools affected by the P-16 reforms. Also, the nature of the relationships between schools and the changes in these relationships required to facilitate the P-16 reform should be taken into account. What types of organizational changes, for instance, are necessary to align curriculum or assessment (dimensions 1 and 2)? (Azinger 2000; Kulpa 1996; Lugg 2000; Lundquist & Nixon 1998)

7. A *community dimension* that involves key stakeholder groups like students' parents, local civic groups, and local business and industry. Without effective outreach to parent groups (with considerable overlap into the *informational* dimension) college readiness and P-16 reforms will have difficulty reaching their goals. The need for family involvement in education is well documented. Public education at all levels in the United States is, with perhaps the exception of large "flagship" research universities, a localized public enterprise. Even regional comprehensive four-year colleges and universities depend on the communities where they are located for most of their student body. Without the support, participation, and input from local groups, P-16 reform will be difficult (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar , Eds. 2005, Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005).

In this treatise the focus will be on the information that can better inform future college readiness initiatives, and the reactions and perceptions of college readiness by public school leadership and participants in a family based outreach organization. The organizational focus will center on administrators and administrative teams at the public school level and how they view the community college's role, while the community focus will be based on information obtained from participants in family and community based workshops.

## WHY STUDY COMMUNITY COLLEGE/HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGE READINESS COLLABORATION

College readiness is an important area of study for three fundamental reasons:

1. Increased public and policy driven attention to the placement of students in remedial/development education at the two-year and four-year levels of higher education. Related issues pertaining to the high numbers of students in remedial/developmental education courses at community colleges, the ultimate success of these students, and the resources colleges devote to these programs are relevant to this aspect of college readiness.

2. Demographic changes in the college-aged population in the United States and the associated achievement gaps among disadvantaged groups of students, including the increasing population of Hispanic students attending community colleges.

3. Changing workforce and economic needs that require an adult population with the skills that community colleges provide; plus market forces that reward attainment of the associates and baccalaureate degree.

One added *benefit* of a more college ready student population has also been identified:

> The social and civic benefits of a more educated population, and evidence that education is part of the solution to the declining civic engagement and participation of large numbers of Americans. The related benefits of building the social capital and educational networks for students have shown positive outcomes for student success (Roueche & Roueche 1999).

I will discuss each of these reasons for the importance of college readiness in more detail below.

### Developmental and Remedial Education

There are three subordinate reasons under the developmental/remedial education heading that give import to college readiness: First, increasing numbers of students are being assessed into developmental/remedial education at the college level, and the

corresponding policy implications of this phenomenon. Second, the economic costs for colleges associated with the provision of remedial educational services and the potential drain this places on already scarce educational resources. And thirdly, the high rate of non-completion among students who begin their college careers in developmental/remedial classes.

There is compelling evidence that many young people graduate from high school unprepared for college level work (Bailey 2002; Green & Winters 2005, McCabe 2005; McCabe 2000; Roueche and Roueche 1999, Roueche & Roueche 1993; Tafel & Eberhart 1999; Wilson 2004). With the commitment to "open door" admissions, relative low cost, and geographic proximity to potential student populations, it is logical that community colleges will enroll a larger student population less prepared for college level academic work than four-year colleges and universities (Buseschel 2004; Dougherty 2002; Vaughan 1982). Less selective colleges and four-year institutions enroll 80 percent of first-year college students (Kirst & Bracco 2004). Kirst (2003) and Rosenbaum (2001), state that many students believe that nonselective four-year institutions and community colleges do not have academic standards, and that this belief contributes to the lack of academic preparation and "wasted" senior year for many high school students. The placement tests for access to credit bearing academic courses used at these institutions often come as a surprise for these students (Kirst 2003, p. 81).

Nationally, 42 percent of community college freshmen enroll in one or more developmental/remedial courses (Wilson 2004). Roueche and Roueche (1999) report that almost half of all first-time community college students *test* as unprepared for college level work. The number of first-time, first-year students enrolling in developmental

courses at institutions serving predominately African-American or Hispanic American students is considerably higher, with 60 to 70 percent of first-time, first-year students enrolling in one or more developmental/remedial courses (Cejda & Rhodes 2004; De Los Santos & De Los Santos 2003; Harrell & Forney 2003; Laden 2004; Marwick 2004).[3] Because of the demands placed on two and four-year institutions of remediation, educational leaders and policymakers have been calling for greater collaboration between the different levels of public education systems for many years.[4] This is especially true for the nation's 1,158 community colleges. Roueche and Roueche (1999) for instance, have called for "a more seamless web" between public educational systems, noting that the community colleges' "relative proximity to secondary education" make them a more likely partner with local high schools than many four-year institutions (pp. 48-49).

The increased attention and resources that community colleges must spend on remediation is the most obvious, existential reason for greater collaboration between these institutions and the secondary level of the educational system (Bueschel 2004). In a special insert to *The Chronicle for Higher Education – School & College* (March 10, 2006), Peter Schmidt makes the following statement that echoes these concerns:

> If college administrators listen beyond their institutions' walls, they can hear crowds of students and parents voicing frustration over colleges' high remediation rates and low graduation rates, visionaries urging the creation of an entirely new educational systems, that would closely link schools and colleges, and political leaders issuing an ultimatum: Tend to the education of the masses, or the next thing you hear will be battering rams (Schmidt 2005, p. B4-5).

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[3] At South Texas College, McAllen TX, for instance, out of student population that is 94.9 percent Hispanic, 67 percent of incoming first-year/first-time students enroll in one or more developmental/remedial education classes (*South Texas College Factbook 2004-2005*).

[4] See for example *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (1993), p. 20.

Obviously, increased attention to college readiness on the part of community college leaders represent part of the reaction to the public concerns expressed by Mr. Schmidt.

**The Expense of Remediation**

A report compiled by the Alliance for Excellent Education, *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation* (2006), citing data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), indicates that one-third of community college freshmen are under age 19 and are enrolled in remedial courses. This statistic is important because many community college students in remedial courses are older, so-called "non-traditional students." The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) report acknowledges that the comprehensive community college offers remedial courses to many laid-off workers returning to the classroom, working adults, older Americans, or recent immigrants (p.2). This point is also well made by Roueche, Ely and Roueche (2001) who state that "as many as half of the entering freshmen class at any community college *have not* recently been educated at tax payer expense" (p. 13, emphasis added), indicating that these students fall into the categories discussed above. Clearly, when addressing college readiness and its relationship to developmental education at the community college level, one must be careful to disaggregate the student population between "traditional" aged students coming to college directly from high school, and those students coming to community college for a different set of reasons, and from a different set of backgrounds and life experiences.

The AEE report indicates that recent high school students are more likely to require remediation than other groups of students because these students are more likely

to pursue the baccalaureate (requiring specified, linked levels of academic preparation), and are more likely to be enrolled on a full-time basis than their older counterparts who are often working full-time and attending college part-time. The full-time/part-time dichotomy may be significant in states that do not require part-time students to take remedial classes (AEE Report, p. 3), however, no such waiver exists in Texas. Furthermore, Texas requires students in non-college transfer degree plans (technical/vocational) to take a minimum of 15 hours of course work in academic transfer content areas, all of which have prerequisites based on assessments of college readiness.

Given these caveats, the AEE Report (2006) estimates that remediation costs America's community colleges $1.4 billion per year. These costs include pay for remedial faculty, classroom space, support services, and other operational costs. Opportunity and information costs for college and students are of course harder to estimate, but these include lost opportunities to offer non-remedial courses, and costs for students in their time spent on non-credit remedial courses. The most significant opportunity cost for colleges is that students in remedial classes are less likely to graduate than non-remedial students (AEE Report 2006). Research cited from the NCES in the AEE Report indicates that 58 percent of students who do not require remediation in reading receive the baccalaureate degree in eight years, while only 17 percent of their counterparts requiring remedial reading achieve the same goal in the same time period. While there is certainly a long list of explanations for these statistics, a pragmatic set of answers to address this phenomenon should include expanded college readiness programs between community colleges and high schools.

**Non-completion Rates Among Developmental Students**

Non-completion of the two or four-year degree is a trend for many students who enroll in higher education and place into remedial/development skills level courses (Dougherty 2002; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005). Of all of these students, it is estimated only one-third of them will ultimately complete a two or four-year degree (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005).[5] A broad body of statistical and qualitative educational research indicates that the best predictor as whether or not a student will persist in college and complete a degree is the quality and rigor of their high school curriculum (Adleman 2005; Adleman 2006; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005). The evidence on student remediation and its relationship to student success presents the most compelling argument for greater collaboration between community colleges and high schools. Students who enter college with better academic preparation will not require remediation. A better understanding of college/public school collaborations for college readiness in different educational contexts will contribute to how to go about solving this dilemma.

Community colleges face a host challenges that are associated with losing roughly one half of their students from year-to-year (McClenney 2004). If colleges can proactively improve student persistence through college readiness initiatives with the high schools in their service areas, they can lower the number of students tracking into developmental education, therewith positively affecting persistence and student success,

[5] Statistical research presented by Adleman (2005, 2006), however, shows that community college students who *persist* and complete developmental/remedial education sequences are as, or even more likely to complete a degree than students who are not assessed into developmental/remedial education. The challenge for college-level educators, especially in the open enrollment community college is to overcome the high attrition rates for developmental students.

and make more effective use of scarce resources. College readiness programs can also add to the experience of students once they come through the open door of the community college. These college ready students will be well prepared for academic, for-credit/transfer track classes, or technical degrees in high-skill/high demand occupational areas. They can provide what Roueche and Roueche (1999), citing Vaughan (1985) have called "keys" to new opportunities for students in the open admissions environment of the community college (p. 10).

This discussion is not meant to imply that developmental education does not have an important instructional and institutional role in the American community college. With their commitment to open door admissions and egalitarian educational opportunity, community colleges will continue to play a vital role in preparing students from all ages and backgrounds for higher learning (Roueche & Roueche 1993; Vaughan 1982). Despite the best efforts of educators' at all educational levels, many students will still not be able to realize the dream of a better life without some level of remediation that the community college is ideally suited to offer. Moreover, increasing numbers of students are earning high school diplomas in their twenties (Cohen & Brawer 2003) or are displaced workers returning to college to improve work skills, older citizens seeking to improve their literacy, or are recent immigrants (Roueche & Roueche 1993; Roueche, Roueche & Ely 2001). Effective college readiness programs between community colleges and high schools represent a true "win-win" scenario for both educational levels. Hypothetically, if high schools can graduate better prepared students, then community colleges can devote more resources to serving the needs of non-traditional at-risk students, as well as improving the existing academic and workforce

development/technical programs that they offer for better prepared recent high school graduates.

## CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The student demand to enroll in higher education is high. 90 Percent of graduating high school seniors say they plan to attend college (either two or four-year institutions), and seventy percent do enroll in some form of higher education (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan 2005). Palmer (2000) has provided data that indicates the student population between the ages of 18 and 26 is expected to grow by 23 percent between the years 1996/1997 and 2009. In Texas, this student population will increase by 30 percent over this same time period (Palmer 2000).

According to Green and Winters (2005), the national high school graduation rate for all public school students has remained flat at around 72 percent between 1991 and 2002. Using a measure based on admissions to the least selective four-year institutions in the United States and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), Green and Winters (2005) found 34 percent of high school students who graduated high school in 2002 were college ready, up from 25 percent in 1991 (p.8). The numbers of college ready white students are considerably higher than for African-American or Hispanic students. 40 percent of white students graduated from high school college-ready, compared with 23 percent of African-American and 20 percent of Hispanic students (p. 8). These statistics, while an improvement over earlier periods, still indicate that roughly two-thirds of high school graduates are *not* college ready, and that roughly eight out of ten African-American and Hispanic students are not prepared for college level academic

work. These observations are troubling given demographic shifts taking in the United States. The American school age population is becoming increasingly diverse and one can assume that issues like the achievement gap will grow more pronounced. According to Carnevale and Fry (2000); in 1950 14 percent of the school population (ages 5-17) in the United States was non-white. By 2000 the school age population was 35.2 percent non-white. In thirty years this population of students will comprise 50.7 percent of all school aged children.

The most important finding of the Green and Winters (2005) study is that there are not significant differences between the number of 2002 high school graduates who are college-ready and the numbers of students who actually entered four-year colleges and universities in the 2002 Fall term (pp.8-10). As indicated above, the number of high school graduates who are college ready improved by nine percentage points between 1991 and 2002 (p. 10). The challenge is to raise the overall number of college ready high school graduates, especially among the population of African-American and Hispanic students. Green and Winters (2005) conclude that in order to increase the number of college-ready high school graduates, more focus should be placed on the K-12 system. The solution to the shortage of college-ready high school students "requires increasing the number of students who have the skills necessary to move on to the next academic level" (p. 11).

There are some important questions about the educational achievement gap that are outside the purview of this treatise, but greater equity in educational services provided for historically disadvantaged groups and/or low-income Americans is a subject that will not go away. The treatise will concern perceptions of college readiness and college

readiness programs for a student population that is overwhelming Hispanic and has historically been underserved by the educational system. The achievement gap is quite real for Hispanic students. Haycock (2001) estimates that of every 100 Latino kindergarteners, 62 will graduate from high school, 29 will complete some college, and 6 will obtain at least a bachelors degree. Of every 100 white kindergartners, 91 will graduate from high school, 62 will complete some college and 30 will obtain at least the bachelors degree. Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, the Hispanic population of the United States is hit hardest by the academic achievement gap (see Table 1), and is the most underserved by the non-integrated educational "pipeline".

**Table 1. Latino Student Pipeline**

| | Will Complete: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | High School | Some College | Bachelors Degree |
| 100 Asian Kindergarten Students | 94 | 80 | 49 |
| 100 African-American Kindergarten Students | 87 | 54 | 16 |
| 100 Hispanic Kindergarten Students | 62 | 29 | 6 |
| 100 White Kindergarten students | 91 | 62 | 30 |

*(Haycock 2001, The Education Trust)*

As stated above, the causes and complexities of the achievement gap are outside the scope of this treatise, college readiness projects, however, can be a part of addressing some of these inequities. In seeking to improve the social and economic positions of the Hispanic student population of South Texas, a better informed set of college readiness

programs at South Texas College has the promise of being transformative and empowering for these students, their families, and the community.

**Hispanic Serving Institutions**

The building of collaborative models between K-12 systems and community colleges, again, is a logical step in this process. This is especially true for community colleges serving Hispanic student populations, as almost 60 percent of Hispanic students enrolled in higher education are in two-year institutions (Benitez & DeAro 2005; De Los Santos & De Los Santos 2003).

Within the total population of Hispanic college students, more than half (54 percent) of all Hispanic students enrolled in higher education attend Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are defined by federal government as degree-granting, public or private, non-profit colleges and universities with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Hispanic students. Of the 242 HSIs in the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, 128 are community colleges (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). Based on current demographic trends, the number of HSIs in the United States is expected to grow significantly in the next 20 years (De Los Santos & De Los Santos, 2003). . Harrell and Forney (2003) have shown that the most effective strategies to increase the college readiness and academic success of first time in college Hispanic students are programs that combine family based mentor programs with improved high school academic preparation.

STC is well over the 25 percent threshold established by the Department of Education for HSIs. HSIs are not founded on “mission specific platforms” like

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Native-American tribal colleges. Demographic shifts "catapult" some institutions into HSI status (Benitez & DeAro 2004; Flores, Horn & Crisp 2006, p. 75). This may be a significant factor for these transitional institutions and the students they serve in that the mission and programmatic orientation will not be specifically geared for Hispanic students (Flores, Horn & Crisp 2006). STC however, is what might be termed a *Native HSI*, in that its location along the U.S.-Mexico border has guaranteed its HSI status from its establishment to the present day. Native HSIs, as opposed to transitional HSIs, may have advantages in serving this student population. In areas like planning, greater numbers of Hispanic faculty, staff, and administrators, and the advantages of more long term access to funding sources like federal Title V revenues can put native HSIs, in some ways, closer to their student population. While explorations of the implications of these differences between native HSIs, and transitional HSIs are outside the scope of this project, this observation provides a better understanding of the context of STC, the institution that will serve as the action research case for this dissertation.

STC was created as South Texas Community College in 1993 by legislative act. It is the only community college in Texas created by the state legislature. To develop a better understanding of history and context of the college, more of the college's history will be explored in Chapter 3, but to establish the context of the case a brief demographic profile of STC and the region served by the college is provided below.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the four Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) in the United States with the highest percentage of Hispanic residents are in South and Southwest Texas. They are the MSAs for: Laredo (94.3 percent), McAllen-

Edinburg-Mission (88.3 percent), Brownsville-Harlingen-San Benito (84.3 percent), and El Paso (78.2 percent). STC serves the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA. According to the 2000 Census the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA has the lowest per capita income in the United States. STC also serves Starr County, TX, the third lowest per capita income county in the United States. STC's 2005 (Fall Semester) student population of 17,035 is 94.9 percent Hispanic, most of whom are first generation college students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board- *College Profile- January 2005*). 88 percent of all first-time/first-year full-time degree seeking students receives some form of financial aid to attend STC (STC 2004-2005 *Factbook*).

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL DEMANDS FOR COLLEGE READINESS

Economic, social, and political factors compound the need for more college-ready high school students. As the potential college age student population is increasing and becoming more diverse, the changed nature of the globalized economy demands a more skilled workforce requiring at least "some college" education (Carnevale & Desrochers 2004; Martinez 2006). Not only are more jobs requiring more college level skills, but employee-training programs report having to provide basic skill remediation in areas reading, math, problem solving, as well as various social skills in areas like timely arrival for work, and working collaboratively with other workers (Roueche and Roueche 1999).

In their survey of justifications for P-16 reforms, Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) identify the following factors and trends as justifications for P-16 reforms: information age job demands, demographic shifts, the need for greater attention to pre-school programs, and the lack of student success which they attribute to the complexity

and non-rationality of the multi-layered "non system" of post-high school education in the United States. As stated above, in the dynamic and rapidly world of the information driven, knowledge based economy, academic preparation and workforce preparation are virtually synonymous.

Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) also highlight the non-economic, socio-political demands of a more diverse society that will place a "premium on citizens' ability to think critically about public issues and perform responsibly in public affairs at the community, state, and national levels" (p. 4). These socio-political democratizing functions of higher education, particularly for community colleges, are well stated by Roueche and Roueche (1993, pp. 25-26) citing Roueche (1968):

1. Education is necessary for the maintenance of democracy. That an educated citizenry will profoundly affect the destiny of a democratic society has been a long held belief in this country.

2. Education is essential for the improvement of society. History records education's valuable role in resolving some of America's most serious social problems: for example, the Americanization of large groups of immigrants in the 1890s and early 1900s, and the assumption of educational responsibilities for these women and children formerly trapped in exploited labor practices in U.S. mills, mines, and factories.

3. Education helps equalize opportunity for all people. The concept of individual worth, upon which this nation was founded fuels the American dream that every individual should be permitted to seek an education to the highest level of his or her potential.

P-16/college readiness reforms represent the continuation and perpetuation of these values and traditions in American higher education. Community colleges are part of the promise of an educational system that, in part, asserts that Americans should have the opportunity to go as far as their abilities will take them (McClenney 2004). This is

evident in their close connections to the communities they serve, their "open door" /non-selective admissions policies, and their relative low cost.

In 1980, then President of the American Association of (Junior) and Community Colleges, Edmund J. Gleazer, articulated six values that should guide the mission of all community colleges: adaptability, community awareness, relationships with learners, opportunity for the underserved, accommodation of diversity, and the community college as a nexus to community learning system (Gleazer 1980, pp. 15 ). Increasing the college readiness of the potential student population for a Hispanic serving community college reflects flexibility and community awareness. New relationships will be forged between the college and schools as existing inter-organizational relationships, like dual enrollment programs, are modified. Community college faculty, outreach and student services staff, and administrators will similarly develop new relationships with this population of potential learners. In helping to close the achievement gap for Hispanic students, STC's college readiness project will reach out to the underserved in our increasingly diverse pluralistic society, and provide educational opportunities for a population that might not otherwise have them. Finally, a holistic college readiness program enhances the integration of the college into the K-12 learning system, and should facilitate the transfer of more students to four-year institutions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, this dissertation will utilize an action research case study

methodology to explore the development and enhancement of the college readiness initiative at South Texas College. Case studies allow researchers to explore a particular phenomenon (the process of developing a college readiness program) and can provide rich description of the events and perceptions of the actors engaged in the phenomenon (Merriam 1998). Case studies ask questions of "how and why" (Yin 1994). How is the process developing? Why is it going in certain directions and emphasizing some aspects of college readiness over others? Case studies are a good way of investigating contemporary events within context (Yin 1994). Because of the diversity and uniqueness of individual community colleges and high schools, and their responses to collaborative projects within the communities they serve, a case study methodology can provide greater understanding to the contextual organizational aspects of a particular college readiness initiative (Mertens 2005; Van Maanen Ed.1998, *Introduction*). As the college readiness project develops, I will explore the process and the "art" of college readiness collaboration.

Although I will discuss more of the nuance and detail of the action oriented research method to be employed in the STC case in Chapter 3, as well as the ontological and epistemological foundation of my research, it is important to identify why this method has been chosen over others.

First, it is necessary to frame this research within a naturalistic setting (Patton 2002). As a participant in the college readiness initiative, I will not be isolated from the subject of the research in a controlled or experimental way. The collaborative process between the college and the high schools will unfold within a unique socio-political context. At this point I do not know how this process will unfold or what high schools

will choose to participate in the collaboration, and why they will choose to do so. I do not know the how the family and community based workshops will evolve and what information they will reveal. In fact, much of the insight into college/high school collaboration that this treatise can offer will come from the answers to these questions. For the college, this insight can help its leaders improve the college readiness initiative by developing a better understanding of the high schools that graduate a large percentage of its potential student population. The college leadership can also develop a better understanding of the wider social and civic community in which it is located. For the broader field of educational leadership, the contextual details and the insights revealed through this inquiry of college/high school collaboration in a community that is over 90 percent Hispanic will also have value. These insights may show what is unique about this community, and what is similar to other regions of the country. The information and new understanding gleaned from this dissertation may have potential for future research in the area Hispanic serving community colleges and/or communities with large populations of Hispanic students. This is particularly relevant given the projected growth of the Hispanic student population forecast throughout the United States.

**Action Research**

This dissertation will be an example of using action research to address the problem of college readiness for the potential student population of STC. Action research is defined by McNiff and Whitehead (2006) as a form of inquiry that enables practitioners to investigate and evaluate their work (p. 7). Action researchers ask questions like: “What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?”

(McNiff and Whitehead 2006, p. 7). The details of the college readiness initiative are still evolving. As a participant in the design and implementation of these projects I will not take the position of the neutral observer (ethnographic field study), nor the evaluative policy analyst (Patton 2002). Rather, my positionality is inside the organization implementing the project, making an action research methodology more applicable to this project (Herr and Anderson 2005). I consider this research to be applied, in that one goal of the research is to improve the practice of STC and participating high schools in the area of student college readiness. Furthermore, because action research is change oriented for both the organization and the researcher, it is important to emphasize that the college readiness initiative at STC will involve changes in the relationships between the college and the high schools that participate in the college readiness initiative.

These changes could entail changes in assessment and curricular alignment that will necessitate levels of administrative and faculty cooperation that do not exist prior to the formation of the collaborative effort. Information sharing, and the formation of parental and community groups to support the college readiness project will also require administrative support and planning that does not exist before the initiative is started. As noted above, relational aspects of these changes already exist through dual enrollment and/or Tech Prep programs, but not at a level specifically directed at improving college readiness.

A second important clarification concerns what is meant by the term *collaboration*. Patricia Montiel-Overall (2005), through a review of educational literature from an explicitly social-constructivist perspective, provides a useful definition of educational collaboration as:

> Trusting, working relationships between two or more equal participants involved in shared thinking, shared planning, and shared creation of integrated instruction. Through shared vision, and shared objectives, student learning opportunities are created that integrate subject content and information literacy by planning, co-implementing, and co-evaluating student progress throughout the instructional process in order to improve student learning in all areas of the curriculum (p. 5).

Collaborations are empowering to the organizations involved in them. And, as noted above, the collaborations central to this treatise seek to empower the high school student population and their families in the STC service area. Again, based on my positionality as an insider to the organization initiating the college readiness program, I too will gain a better understanding of STC and this community and my role as a professional within them. This process of action, reflection, personal and professional growth, as well as the concepts of empowerment and positionality are central to action research and will be explored further in Chapter 3 (Herr and Anderson 2005).

Action research is an appropriate research method for this dissertation because:

1. The college readiness initiative at STC is still being developed.
2. The program will involve change.
3. The researcher is positioned inside the organization initiating the change
4. The initiative has the potential to empower potential students, their families, other members of the organizations involved in the initiative, and the researcher.

Specific techniques, like interviews, focus groups, and narrative based reflection etc. will evolve throughout the research process, reflecting what Anderson and Herr (2005) call the "spiraling synergism of action and understanding" (pp. 70-71). Any action research project, however, involves a cyclical pattern of observation, reflection, action, evaluation, modification, and action in a new direction (McNiff &Whitehead 2006).

The action research approach in this treatise will incorporate two elements of participative inquiry identified by Reason (1994) as co-operative inquiry and Participatory Action Research. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) identifies three developmental

stages of action research; technical inquiry, practical, and emancipatory, and believes the researcher can begin at the most basic technical and practical levels, and progressively develop towards the more involved emancipatory level. The ultimate aim, according to Zuber-Skerritt (1992), of any action research project is to improve practice in a systematic way, and suggest ways to make changes in the context where the practice takes place (p. 11). According to Reason, co-operative inquiry has various forms, but may involve a group member who acts as a facilitator of an inquiry process.

Participatory action research "emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production" (Reason 1994, p. 6). By including community outreach, information sharing, and knowledge gathering from the families in a family outreach groups in the STC/high school community (facilitated by bilingual co-researchers) this strategy will seek to empower this population and help them improve their lives and those of their high school aged children. In this aspect of my research, I will work directly among a community of people who have experienced discrimination and have been the victims of structural disadvantage in a socio-political system beyond their control. I will explore more of these issues in Chapter Two through a discussion of the work of Angela Valenzuela, and Laura Rendon. Reason (1994) identifies community meetings and events of various kinds as key elements of participatory action research; again, making action research an ideal method for this treatise and the high school college readiness relationships that are the focus of this research.

**Theory and Action Research**

Action research does not seek to test, build upon, nor refute generalizable social-scientific theories (McNiff & Whitehead 2006). Because action research involves personal involvement and personal development, "action researchers research themselves, in the company of others" (McNiff & Whitehead 2006, p. 32), and develop personal theories of development within an organization and to explain the changes in which they are active participants. Insights gained from action research can be used for applied, practical problem solving for a school or college, thus differentiating action research from more basic forms of social scientific research (Glanz 2003; Herr and Anderson 2005).

While the subject matter and research methods of this treatise are not intended to emulate the natural sciences in theory building or hypothesis testing, a theoretical framework is useful to provide direction and a basis for understanding the phenomena that any research project explores. Schramm (2003) characterizes theories as ways to provide "connectedness, critique, and purposefulness to research" (p. 42). Connectedness joins research to larger questions. Critique provides a critical perspective to earlier studies within the same theoretical framework. And purposefulness narrows the scope of the research and helps the researcher focus and avoid studying "everything" connected to research question (ibid). Two forms of action research that are linked to a larger literature are *contextual action research* and *experiential/educational action research* (O'Brien 1998). Contextual action research concerns relations between organizations (O'Brien 1998). Participants within organizations act as co-researchers as they meet and reach consensus about their plans of action. Educational action research is based on the

work of John Dewey (1938, 1998). Central to Dewey's work on experiential education was a belief in connecting educators to community problem solving.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I have identified the importance of college readiness for high school students as part of wider efforts to better integrate the fragmented educational system in the United States, and the role that community colleges can play in preparing prospective student populations for higher learning. As more and more students are assessed (however imperfectly) into non-credit developmental education courses in community colleges, and the attention of policymakers is increasingly focused on these issues, the need for college readiness collaboration between community colleges and high schools has grown in importance. Increasing the college readiness of high school students can also have benefits for the economic well being of these students, and the communities where they live. Students who leave high school better prepared for college are also better prepared for the workplace, and have the potential to be more civically and socially engaged in their communities.

I have also identified the importance of college readiness for Hispanic students in South Texas. These populations of students, and these communities and families have historically been underserved by the educational system. South Texas College, the only legislatively created community college in the state, has only been in existence for 13 years, indicating that establishment of the college was part of political and legal efforts to rectify this situation. Greater levels of college readiness for these students can help close

the academic achievement gap that exists between the white and non-white population of the United States.

To learn more about the specific nature of college readiness, and to develop a better understanding of the process of building a collaborative program between the college, the high schools, and the community it serves, I have suggested an action research case study methodology. Action research will allow me as a facilitator of the college readiness project to develop my own awareness of the changes taking place at the college. In another important part of this project, I propose that part of this study should focus on community meetings and family workshops facilitated by Spanish speaking collaborators, and these activities be used to develop a greater understanding of the role of family and community in preparing students for college. My positionality as an English speaking, white, outsider cannot be overcome.[6] However, with bilingual colleagues from the college helping me, I can begin to understand the community better and use this new knowledge to improve future college readiness projects, and my own personal and professional development.

In the following chapters I will explore how other authors have studied college readiness between high schools and community colleges. I will also provide more discussion and synthesis of the literature on Hispanic students, and the role of families and communities in developing the educational and social capital for these students.

Finally, I will explore in greater detail the aspects and techniques of action research that I will use to begin this study. I will explicitly locate my work paradigmatically on an ontological and epistemological foundation. I will also discuss

[6] I will discuss my *outsider* status in my personal reflective narrative in Chapter 4.

the ethical considerations of action research. Because action research is highly inductive, and heavily reliant on the decisions and reflections of others, much of these techniques will evolve and change; as will the college readiness initiatives that the college is undertaking. However, through a more thorough discussion of the nuance and specific theories of action research, a useful starting point and focus can be gained. In a very relevant way, this treatise is a true journey of discovery and acquisition of new knowledge for the author, his audience, and most importantly, for the other participants in the inquiry. It is the educators, students, and families of South Texas who I hope will be the greatest beneficiaries of this project.

# CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter One I established why college readiness for prospective community college students is an important issue for study. I also discussed how a better understanding of the process of establishing more comprehensive college readiness initiatives between a Hispanic serving community college and the high schools in its service area can improve the operations of the college, empower the student population, and professionally develop the researcher and his colleagues. This understanding may also be beneficial to community colleges and high schools with similar student populations.

In this chapter I will review the relevant literature on community college/high school collaboration to establish a conceptual framework for this research. I will do this through a brief analysis of the history of the community college and how the evolution of fiscal and governance relationships has exacerbated some of the disjunctions between educational levels in the United States. I will discuss previous theoretical and applied approaches that have been used to explore questions pertaining to community college/high school collaboration. I will also explore the literature as it pertains to community building and family based outreach for Hispanic serving community colleges. Related to the Hispanic serving character of South Texas College, I will explore through

the literature, the educational disadvantages that this population continues to experience, and how the creation of social capital in this population is one way to continue the process of increasing the educational, economic, and civic opportunities for the residents of the South Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley.

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE/ HIGH SCHOOL COLLABORATION

In 1973, then President of the American Association of Junior and Community Colleges, Edmund G. Gleazer, accurately predicted that remediation and finance related issues would require greater collaboration between community colleges and high schools. In a work entitled *Project Focus*, President Gleazer presented the results of a nation-wide survey of community college leaders, faculty, staff, students, state legislators, and members of college boards of trustees. Five college functions, and/or factors affecting college functions, were studied:

1. Changes in the student population.
2. Changes in how they (students) are served.
3. Changes in organization and governance.
4. Shifts in financial support.
5. Trends in community relations.

Gleazer found persistent financial problems for community colleges despite the strong fiscal support from state governments that existed at that time. Why? The explanation President Gleazer provided concerned enrollment growth and increases in the size and scope of program offerings (p. 158-159). These increases on the demand side for community college services, coupled with commitments to low tuition and a looming property tax revolt (anticipated accurately by Gleazer) combined to create fiscal crises for the colleges surveyed by the *Project Focus* study (177-178). To overcome the property

tax aversion of community college service areas, Edmund Gleazer believed in forging closer ties between the college and the community (p. 178). This point is well made in the following extended quote:

> "Community colleges have tended to look to four-year colleges as having a great deal of influence on their destiny. But it appears there is a growing realization that community colleges will have their role determined to a great degree by secondary schools. Community colleges need, in this regard to redirect some of their attention. They need to turn around and look at the schools that are preparing the students that come to them… Whether community colleges are going to be asked to make up the deficiencies of a much larger and earlier system or build upon an effective educational foundation already laid in the secondary schools will make a great deal of difference in terms of finances needed…They must make themselves part of a system of education and work to make the system effective as a whole." *(Project Focus, p. 178).*

From this excerpt one can see Gleazer not only anticipates the need for greater collaboration between the K-12 public schools, community colleges, and four-year higher education, he also accurately predicts the demands that remedial and developmental education will place on community colleges. This theme is continued in Chapter 9 of the *Project Focus* report which discusses the other end of the public education pipeline, community college, four-year college/university relations; the forward transfer of community college students. As community college scholar George Vaughan has characterized it, central to Gleazer's thought is "the integration of the community college to its community" (Vaughan 1982, 1989, p. 19).

These sentiments are echoed in words of the *Commission on the Future of the Community College* (1988, 1989). The *Commission,* appointed by American Association of Junior and Community Colleges and chaired by Ernest Boyer, devoted a large section of its report to the role of community colleges and the development of the social and economic well-being of the communities they serve. The report recognized that

community colleges (like all educational institutions) seek to accomplish two fundamental goals: "enhancing the power and dignity of the individual" (human capital) (p. 331), and building the social and civic relationships of neighborhoods and communities (social capital). Indeed the title of the commission's report, *Building Communities: Vision for a New Century*, emphasizes these compatible themes. The final report contains 77 separate recommendations ranging from student and curricular development, to the professional development of faculty and leadership, to recommendations regarding collaboration and community development more germane to this dissertation. For instance, in section VI of *Building Communities: Vision for a New Century*, partnerships with other educational levels are discussed. Citing historical evidence dating back to the establishment of "The Committee of Ten" at Harvard University in 1894 under the leadership of Harvard president Charles Eliot, the Commission identified the responsibility of higher education to add coherence and quality to K-12 instruction. The commission made three recommendations in this area:

1. Communities should organize school/college consortiums in their respective regions. These partnerships should develop plans for educational excellence that include teacher/faculty enrichment and the provision of curriculum continuity in general and technical studies.

2. Community colleges should work with surrounding public schools to identify at-risk youth, and beginning in junior high school, provide enrichment programs that would make it possible for such students to complete high school and move on to higher education.

3. Community colleges should report back to the high schools in their region regarding the academic performance of their students. [7]

[7] *The Commission on the Future of the Community College*, 1988, 1989, pp. 354-355)

In their discussion of establishing better connections between community colleges and the high schools that send them students, Edmund Gleazer (1973) and the members of the *Commission on the Future of the Community College*, were in some ways alluding to an obvious historical attribute of the community college that from time to time some educational leaders have lost sight of; in many instances community colleges began as extensions of public high schools (Cohen and Brawer (2003). The development of the American *junior* college actually has two central sources; these institutions developed as university branch campuses, offering preparatory instruction in first two years of lower division coursework, or as "district junior colleges, organized by the [local] secondary school district" (Cohen and Brawer, 2003, p. 3).

The dual nature of origins of the American community college has been termed by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel (1989) as "a fundamental alteration in the landscape of American higher education" (p. 6). The first public junior college, Joliet Junior College (IL), began as an extension of Joliet High School in 1902 (Roueche & Roueche 1993). Joliet Junior College reflected the duality of college origins in that the extension of two more years of education after high school and before entry to the university was done at the urging of University of Chicago president, William Rainey Harper (Roueche & Roueche 1993; Vaughan 1982, 1989). Similarly, the large California junior/community college system was legislatively created in 1907 at the urging of Alexis F. Lange, Dean of the School of Education, UC Berkeley, and the president of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan (Roueche & Roueche 1993). The 1907 legislation "authorized public school districts to offer the first two years of college work" (ibid, p. 24).

In case studies of the historical evolution of three separate junior colleges in Michigan, Nebraska, and Massachusetts by James Ratcliff (1987, 1989), the common link in the formation of these colleges was the role played by public school superintendents and public school systems (p. 49). Other factors concerning the relationship to the local economy, and business and civic support for the establishment of these colleges were also found relevant by Ratcliff.

Focusing on governance, education policy, and political relationships in the "bellwether" states of California and Florida, Dale Tillery and James L. Wattenbarger (1985, 1989) found that the well developed community college systems in both states evolved from local high schools, but gradually became more centralized systems controlled by their respective state legislatures. In Texas, communities create two-year colleges through local elections. Local taxing districts are responsible for physical plant construction and maintenance (Breneman and Nelson 1980). Instructional costs are paid by the legislative appropriation based on a simple student contact-hour formula (ibid). This kind of formula funding makes no distinction between rich and poor community college districts (ibid).

More recently, Boswell (2000) has stated that community colleges and K-12 systems share a common history and value system rooted in the public schools and the "junior college." Open-door admissions, for instance, are shared values that characterize public schools and community colleges (Boswell 2000; Cohen & Brawer 2004). It was not until the 1960s that the governance of community colleges in many states began to shift from public school boards of education at the state level to postsecondary coordinating boards and governing boards (Boswell, 2000, p. 4). Community colleges in

Texas, like 18 other states, locally elect governing boards of trustees (Boswell 2000), but depend increasingly on state appropriations and student fees and tuition payments. They also depend on policy direction from the state coordinating board, operating at the behest of the state legislature.

Despite historical, political, and value based similarities to high schools, community colleges have adapted organizational cultures more similar to four-year colleges and universities (Boswell 2000). Faculty rank, administrative structures and titles, and graduation rituals are some obvious university characteristics emulated in the community college. This is to be expected as modern comprehensive community colleges retain many of the "junior college" missions associated with academic, for-credit transfer to the four-year level of higher education. Since community colleges in most states depend on funding from three main sources; local property taxes, student fees and tuition payments, and state appropriation, they are fiscally, only partially responsible to local constituencies.

Michael Kirst and Andrea Venezia (2001) have stated that the lack of connection between the K-12 and higher education levels have deep roots in the 20$^{th}$ century history of American public education. In 1900 the College Board set uniform standards for academic subjects, and issued syllabi in various subject areas to help students prepare for college level work, but according to Kirst and Venezia (2001) this connection was "never very strong, first frayed, then fell apart" (p. 93). Kirst and Venezia attribute these discontinuities to a variety of sources having to do with the fragmented and decentralized political nature of American public education (see also Fowler 2005). Educational policies are set by the different governing bodies discussed above. Funding mechanisms

and accountability systems vary across and within states, leaving very few policy levers for the facilitation of more coordinated linkages across the levels of the P-16 educational system (Kirst and Venezia 2001).

Kisker (2006) has found that earlier efforts to integrate high school and community colleges fell short of "widespread implementation" because of established, yet separate governance and funding structures for community (junior) colleges and public K-12 education (p. 77-80). Indeed early junior college advocates and scholars like Leonard Koos pushed for a complete revision of public education in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. These reforms would have located the last two years of high school within the junior college; the so-called 6-4-4 plan (Kisker 2006).[8]

Kisker (2006) finds that similar efforts to initiate widespread Middle Colleges based on the model of La Guardia Community College (see pp. 63-66 of this treatise) were hampered by separate policy systems and funding formulas, and by the organizational isomorphism of community colleges. From this perspective, community/junior colleges were more eager to emulate four-year higher education than K-12 public education. Kisker (2006) also highlights recent reforms to establish Early College High Schools and academies that award both the high school diploma and an associates degree or two years of college credit simultaneously. Early College High Schools (ECHS) are presently broadly supported by philanthropic organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Like earlier efforts at high

[8] The 6-4-4 plan of Leonard Koos advocated locating the traditional first through sixth grades within the elementary school, the seventh through tenth grades within the junior high school, and the eleventh through first two years of college (so-called 13-14 years) within the junior college (Kisker 2006, p. 69).

school/community college integration, Kisker (2006) sees policy and governmental support as the key variable to the success of the ECHS reforms.[9]

While Edmund Gleazer's call for stronger connections to the local educational system is a strong one, the lack of better curricular and assessment based alignment between the K-12 and community college levels of the educational system discussed in Chapter 1 is evidence that this call can often go unheeded, and that fiscal and policy arrangements are obstacles to their implementation.

In curricular matters and the academic transfer function, there is evidence of a disjunction in the American educational system. The literature cited above indicates that despite strong historical and political connections to local public schools, community colleges have gradually shifted to institutions that more closely resemble four-year institutions. Like four-year higher educational institutions, they are heavily dependent on funding from state appropriations and student fees and tuition, and organizationally they more closely resemble the four-year university than the public schools from which they originated.

This is not to imply that community colleges are isolated from their communities. Roueche, Taber, and Roueche (1995) and Roueche and Jones Eds. (2005) have presented strong evidence that creative community colleges, often to proactively confront fiscal and budgetary shortfalls, are responsive to the economic and civic demands of their communities. Many of the partnerships and collaborative efforts discussed in Roueche, Taber and Roueche (1995) and Roueche and Jones Eds. (2005) include community

[9] In keeping with the action research nature of this project; my central role at STC been the coordination of four evolving Early College High School projects with partnering public school districts.

college/K-12 partnerships. These two books serve as guides for college leaders who wish to build deeper, more meaningful relationships with both public and private entities in the communities they serve. The focus of the case studies presented in Roueche, Taber and Roueche (1995) and Roueche and Jones Eds. (2005) are on individual, localized efforts, not systemic state-wide educational policy reform in area the of community college/high school collaboration and the academic preparedness of high school graduates in the communities studied. However these local efforts can be replicated on a more systemic basis within specific regions of the various states. One such example of regionalism in primary/secondary/postsecondary collaboration is the *Central Texas P-16 Education Collaborative* (Dawson 2006). Focusing on the deleterious economic effects of "leaks in the educational" pipeline, this report prescribes a broadening of support for shared data, and more comprehensive alignment across all levels of the Central Texas educational system. At the core of the efforts are grassroots community efforts, and the inclusion of stakeholders in the public and private sectors in the planning and implementation of the collaborative. The *Central Texas P-16 Education Collaborative* places Austin Community College at the center of its organizational chart.

## SIGNALING THEORY AND COLLEGE/HIGH SCHOOL COLLABORATION

As indicated by the above discussion and the relevant P-16 literature presented in Chapter 1, many of the college readiness issues and the lack of integration in the American education system are related to educational policies. According to the *Consortium for Policy Research in Education* (CPRE), K-12 and higher education systems developed separate organizational structures in academic standards, student

performance, faculty performance, curricula and programs, and recruitment and compensation for faculty (CPRE Policy Brief RB- 31 June 2000). Kirst and Bracco (2004), for instance, cite few accountability measures that link the K-12 systems with higher education. These authors trace the roots of these policy discontinuities to the lack of well-communicated signals about assessment, and the academic expectations that higher education practitioners have of their students entering their institutions from our nations' high schools. Students, for example, may believe that two-year "open door" admissions community colleges have no academic standards for credit bearing classes (Kirst and Bracco 2004, p. 3) and be ignorant of the importance of tests used to place them into developmental/remedial or academic transfer/credit bearing courses.

Because of incongruous governance and funding structures there has been little incentive for these signals to be given across the boundaries of the educational system. K-12 policies are designed for an educational system that assumed only an upper stratum of students would go to college, despite the fact that over 70 percent of high school graduates continue on to some form of postsecondary education (Kirst and Bracco 2004, p. 15). According to Kirst and Bracco, admissions policies and placement standards are *communicative signals* for students in high school (pp. 19-20). Policy signals, when communicated to students effectively and efficiently offer incentives and positive motivations for student behavior. Mixed signals "have the opposite effect" (Kirst and Bracco 2004, p. 19). In effect, poorly communicated signals from higher education practitioners confuse students, teachers, and administrators at the secondary level of the educational system (Williams, Lindle, & West 2005). Posited by Fuhrman and O'Day (1996), signaling theory in education policy stresses that clearly aligned policies

articulated by higher education institutions improve student performance by giving teachers clear goals for their students at the high school level. Some critics see the signaling theoretic approach as both simplistic and overly optimistic (Williams, Lindle, & West 2005). However, the signaling theory presented by Kirst and Bracco (2004) in Kirst and Venezia Eds.(2004) also helps the college readiness researcher better conceptualize the systemic nature of the gaps that have evolved between the different levels of the American education system.

Signaling theory is used by Andrea Conklin Bueschel (2004) to analyze case studies of six community colleges scattered across California, Maryland, and Oregon. The study's results were based on student focus groups, and interviews of faculty, staff, and administrators at these colleges. Buechel's research team found students generally did not know about the "new" array of placement tests they would face when they entered the open admissions colleges, but they had been so conditioned by standardized tests in the K-12 system that they were "unfazed" (p. 279). Bueschel's main evidence of the disjuncture is the high number of recent high school graduates in developmental education programs in the nation's community colleges. From the cases of Bueschel's study, a number of challenges are raised for modern comprehensive community colleges. Admissions offices in the open enrollment atmosphere of the community college should be more than a point of entry for students; they should convey information to students about the various academic requirements that exist in the open enrollment environment. Given the high numbers of students academically unprepared for the college environment, community colleges should devote more resources to advising and acclimating students to the relatively unstructured environment of higher education.

Bueschel's research found many examples of localized programmatic collaborative efforts between community colleges and the K-12 educational level. These programs included summer bridge programs, dual enrollment/dual credit programs, and the offering of community college assessment to high school juniors and seniors. One college in this study had an extensive faculty-to-faculty curricular vertical alignment program in the both math and English content areas. The most important finding of this research was that community college administrative staff and faculty had little knowledge of K-12 reforms and assessments (p. 279). Community colleges, for the most part, assessed students independently of K-12 systems in their service areas. According to Bueschel: "There is little sense of any formal efforts to work between the systems, by using for example, one of the high school statewide assessments as a placement tool for the colleges" (Bueschel 2005, p. 279).

Overall, for community colleges, the balance between open-admissions and the requirements of assessment, placement, and high numbers of remedial/developmental students left these institutions somewhat conflicted. One faculty member quoted by Bueschel illustrates this conflict: "So, what's the message we want to send? That you can always come here, it's never too late to change your life. Or, do we want to say, well if you want to get here, you need to shape up right now" (p. 279).

While Bueschel does a good job in making the case for better communication between levels of the education system as an important part of college/high school cooperation and college readiness, she does not discuss the issues of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic class, and the relationship between these factors to the lack of preparedness of students for college level work. Does signaling theory and better

communication across educational levels overcome the barriers that poor Hispanic students face in standardized testing and the obstacles that financial hardship imposes on these students? Does an academic culture that in some ways is imposed on Hispanic students from the outside hinder both their academic preparedness and their academic success? This is not to say that providing more precise and more comprehensive information to students and their families about the procedures, costs, and expectations of higher education in non-selective institutions is not important. I only mean to imply that it is part of an answer to the issues surrounding the college readiness of high school students. A corollary to the signals that higher education sends to high school students, their families, and educators at the secondary level must include cultural and regional sensitivities to make comprehensive informational sessions and workshops more effective. I will explore some of these questions and issues below in a discussion of social capital formation and Hispanic students as I draw closer to applying this literature to the case of college readiness and South Texas College.

## Other Categories and Theoretical Frameworks for Community College/High School Collaboration

Writing from a more policy oriented perspective, Margaret Orr and Debra Bragg (2001) have surveyed the literature on public school/community college collaboration (which they term K-14 system formation) and identified five general categories under which past research and writing in this area can be categorized, and the ways various issues in this area have been studied.

First, these authors discuss a contextual dimension that identifies the range of activities that collaborative efforts may look like. Orr and Bragg characterize these activities as being inter-institutional relationships that are categorized as *coordinated*, *integrated*, *collaborative*, and *partnership*s. Coordination is defined as "the purposeful alignment of personnel, infrastructure, resources, and constituents to meet complementary or shared goals" (Orr & Bragg 2001, pp. 101-102). Integration is defined as more extensive than coordination "through the intertwining of K-12 community college systems in new ways to provide a more cohesive K-14 educational system (ibid, p.102). A *Middle College* initiative (see below) would fit Orr and Bragg's conceptualization of K-14 integration. Partnerships (although used differently by other scholars) are used by Orr and Bragg to describe the "interpersonal relationships between people working in the two systems who work toward a common vision or goals" (ibid). Collaboration, is administrative in character and is used to describe "inter-institutional relationships formed to support shared purposes and outcomes, including decision-making, and accountability processes and procedures" (ibid). According to Orr and Bragg, because community colleges enroll large number of recent high school graduates, and through remediation prepare many of these students for college-level studies, they are well positioned for greater integration with K-12 systems. From the identification of these categories, one can identify a continuum of community college/high-school interaction looks like this:

integrated…….coordination……collaboration……..partnership
*(highest level of involvement)* *(lower levels of involvement; interpersonal relationships)*

Orr and Bragg (2001) also focus on three theoretical dimensions in a subject area they describe as *K-14 system building* (pp. 105-108). At the most basic level there are calls for greater

K-14 cooperation on the basis of structural efficiency (p. 105-107). According to these arguments, programs like dual enrollment save resources for colleges and schools, as students earn both high school and college credit in the same class.[10]

Other organizational aspects like duplication of services, including efforts to address college-level remediation before students leave high school, are based on theories of structural efficiency (see Parnell 1994, cited in Orr & Bragg 2001). Similarly, policy centered work on school-college relationships that focus on administrative issues like logistics, common assessment, accountability, and curricular vertical alignment fit within the structural efficiency approach to K-14 system development (Orr & Bragg 2001, pp. 106-107).

Less applied, more theoretical approaches to K-14 relationships concern what Orr and Bragg term *social equity goals* and *human capital goals* (pp. 107-108). Social equity approaches to college/school relationships focus on the access and social mobility that higher education affords individuals, and the benefits that feed back into the local community from having a better educated citizenry. Despite some acknowledged contradictions between individuals pursuing higher education for market-based self-interested advantage, and the democratization effects of a better educated population, Orr and Bragg downplay these theoretical inconsistencies. They maintain that individual

[10] In Chapter 1 I identified dual enrollment programs as providing instruction for students who by definition are already college ready. Dual enrollment programs may help colleges and schools develop inter-organizational relationships and thus facilitate greater levels of cooperation. They may also aid in the development of what might be termed a "college-going" culture among the students of high-schools with extensive dual enrollment programs, and provide more opportunities for advanced students to earn college credit while still in high school. This latter effect of dual enrollment programs is, I believe, an area with potential for future study. Because entry into dual enrollment programs is usually merit based, attention should also focus on whether or not these programs aid more socio-economically affluent high school students. One way to begin this kind of analysis would be to collect data as to how many students in dual enrollment programs receive and free and reduced lunch compared to how many do not; a typical measure of the socio-economic status of public school students

economic prosperity is dependent on social mobility and the expansion of educational opportunity; the latter being two factors essential to a more democratic society. Below I will explore more of the social capital building and political empowerment aspects college/high school collaboration raised by these observations, especially as they pertain to the Hispanic population of South Texas.

More explicitly economic theories of K-14 collaboration are based on the building of human capital (Orr & Bragg 2001, p. 108). These approaches stress the economic benefit for individuals who earn college degrees and the economic benefits for communities where these individuals live. Human capital theories explicitly see education as an economic investment with payoffs for the individual and view a more educated workforce as a more economically productive workforce. Criticism of these theories has centered on the perspective that community colleges treat students like private commodities as knowledge workers, and the colleges themselves are conceptualized as producers of the economic commodity of "knowledge," rather than the public good of education (Schugerensky, 2003). Students are conceived of as outputs and commodities rather than people. There is compelling evidence that higher education offers substantial market benefits for the possessors of the credentials these institutions offer (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). However, to focus solely on these benefits is to ignore the social and democratizing effects of education on communities and the deeper levels of community building emphasized by educational leaders like Edmund Gleazer. It seems more fruitful to focus on the social implications of education as a democratizing force in a society plagued with persistent social inequities. Again, Orr and Bragg (2001)

are accurate in their assertion that economic mobility, social mobility, and political empowerment need not be treated discretely.

The student dimension of K-14 studies is a third pattern of research that Orr and Bragg identify. These works emphasize the increasing student demand for higher education based on "intense" peer and familial pressure (p. 109). Many of these students have unrealistic expectations about the rigors of academic life in higher education. Students desire to go to college even if they are unprepared to do so. These demands mean community colleges will face increasing enrollments and increasing demands on their services for remedial and developmental education (ibid). These student demands, coupled with the overwhelming economic value of credentials and skills that community colleges offer, will continue to lead to increasing college enrollments into the foreseeable future. Increased attention on high school preparation is a natural outcome of these "demand side" forces. As noted in Chapter 1, if community colleges can work better with the high schools that send them students in the area of college readiness, they can devote more resources to the needs of non-traditional students, as well as their academic and technical programs.

Deborah Orr's own work on inter-organizational relations provides a fourth avenue of research in this area (Orr 1999, pp. 112-114). Because community colleges are located near neighborhoods served by public schools and have open enrollment policies they are in a better position to serve students who would otherwise not go on to higher education. Furthermore, because of their comprehensive community based mission, community colleges are organized to serve a wider array of student interests in areas like workforce preparation, continuing education, adult education, on top of the traditional

academic transfer mission. Community colleges are more flexible in their course offerings in the times, programs, and locations where these services are made available, than most four-year universities and colleges.

Orr (1999) has found that community colleges that serve geographic regions that encompass more than one school district may face problems of institutional capacity in the development of meaningful K-14 initiatives. These colleges may have more high schools in their service area and more potential students in these schools than they are able handle. Another key factor in Orr's analysis was community college leadership. Leaders who focused on workforce development were able to more quickly adapt their institutions to greater levels of cooperation with K-12 systems; one assumes because of the preeminence of workforce development in the modern comprehensive community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The final piece of the K-14 puzzle discussed by Orr and Bragg (2001) are policy incentives that encourage this level of cooperation. Federal programs and the fiscal support that comes with them, like GEAR-UP, School to Work, and Tech-Prep provide incentives for colleges to develop closer relationships with K-12 systems (pp. 114-115). However, because community colleges are so tightly linked to educational policies at the state and local level, more support at these levels is needed to increase the capacity of community colleges to forge closer relationships with K-12 systems (p. 115).

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a comprehensive federally funded program targeted at low-income middle school cohorts of students and their families to provide college awareness and help them prepare for college (Cabrera et. al 2003). GEAR UP is designed to help these students develop

the social knowledge and social networks that will make attending college more of social norm for these students and their families. Cabrera et. al (2003) in a study of 47 GEAR UP 6th grade cohorts and a control group of 133 "peer schools" with similar student cohort characteristics (except these students) were not part of GEAR UP programs. Using *t*-tests, these researchers found no significant difference between GEAR UP schools/students and "peer group" schools/students across a variety of college readiness measures and benchmarks; except that GEAR UP students showed lower mean scores on standardized math tests than "peer group" students administered in the 8th grade (Cabrera et. al 2003, p. 12). GEAR UP students also scored slightly lower on reading assessments that non-GEAR UP students. These researchers also note that GEAR-UP schools performed lower than peer groups schools in reading and math in grades 3 through 5 (before these students were exposed to the GEAR UP program) and that the improvement of GEAR UP schools was at a slightly faster rate than "peer group" schools. These authors conclude that GEAR UP did have a positive effect on the upward slope of test scores in reading and math, but that this may be more "suggestive" than conclusive about the effects of GEAR UP programs in these schools (Cabrera et. al 2003, p. 18).

In a survey of GEAR UP programs in Connecticut, Nadia Ward (2006) found that GEAR UP strategies involving the implementation of more rigorous curriculum in middle and high schools, comprehensive mentoring, and greater parental involvement in low income schools were widely dispersed across these schools. Ward does not provide concrete data to show improvement across measures like test scores or college-going rates. She states that questions in these areas remain "unanswered" (p. 64). She does however document that large numbers of students, and large personnel work hours are

being devoted to GEAR UP and GEAR UP like activities in these schools. Ward questions if GEAR UP programs and strategies can become institutionalized and sustainable in an educational environment of increased accountability and short tenures for public school leaders (superintendents and principals). Because GEAR-UP is cohort driven, results of the program's effectiveness may not be evident in the two to three year time frames that accountability measures mandated by laws like No Child Left Behind. She emphasizes that unless these programs are accompanied by broad based buy-in by all relevant stakeholders, and by collaboration and planning from the higher education levels of the educational system, these programs' sustainability may become problematic. Ward concludes by stating that there is good evidence that nine factors evident in GEAR UP show promise to close the achievement and college-going rates for disadvantaged groups. These factors are:

1. Effective and sustained leadership to support the program.
2. Small class sizes.
3. High expectations for all students.
4. Increased academic standards.
5. Rigorous academic coursework.
6. Academic enrichment and support activities
7. High-quality professional development for teachers.
8. Programs to empower parents.
9. Student scholarships and financial aid for students from targeted groups.

Orr and Bragg's identification of five areas scholarship on community college/public school collaboration have relevance in applied areas and for this dissertation in the four ways. First, the contextual dimension allows the planners of college/high-school initiatives to develop well reasoned road maps as to how to construct these programs more systematically. Dual-enrollment programs, for instance, fall in the range of *collaboration* in the contextual continuum in their planning and execution,

whereas less extensive high-school college outreach programs that set up promotional tables for the college on “senior day” or “college day” require lower levels of *partnership* as defined by Orr and Bragg. Community colleges wishing to more fully and systematically implement college readiness initiatives should move towards more *integrated* types of initiatives; like the *Middle/Early College High School.*

Second, Orr and Bragg provide useful theoretical frameworks to help better focus these cooperative ventures. In an era of declining governmental support and increasing enrollments (Boggs 2004; McClenney 2004) the more descriptive elements of the structural efficiency justifications for college/high school college readiness projects have great relevance.

Given their commitment to open enrollment and the democratization of higher education, community colleges are a natural fit for placing their college readiness initiatives within the social equity theoretical framework discussed by Orr and Bragg. I will discuss more in this area below under the subject headings of social capital formation and Hispanic families.

The student dimensions of K-14 research identified by Orr and Bragg provide many justifications for more systematic outreach programs that provide valuable information about the nature of college level assessment testing and its uses in placing students into developmental/non-credit or academic credit bearing courses. Community colleges are faced with increasing demands on their educational services from both increasing enrollments and student expectations of college attendance. Colleges that do not adequately provide assessment information to high-school students, their families, and the professional staff and faculty at the secondary level do so at their peril. These

ostrich-like colleges will face a tide of under-prepared students that will overwhelm even the best of developmental studies departments and force them to divert scarce resources to non-credit instruction. Nontraditional students who may truly need the benefits that good remediation can deliver will also be harmed in this process.

Finally, Orr (1999) highlights the importance of institutional capacity for colleges seeking to implement more broad based systematic college readiness relationships between the college and the high-schools that send them students. Colleges whose service areas include many high -schools may simply not have the resources in personnel, money, and logistical support to initiate, much less sustain, the kind of comprehensive programmatic packages that include: extensive family based outreach, meaningful information sharing across professional and organizational boundaries, assessment alignment, and vertical curricular alignment driven by faculty-to-faculty collaboration. More realistically, colleges serving large numbers of high-schools should strategically target their resources to those schools with the greatest need and/or those sending the college the largest number of students. After initial pilot initiatives with these schools, colleges could leverage future plans with grant funding and burden sharing with the secondary schools in their respective regions.

Theoretical perspectives are also useful to add coherence to descriptive case studies that are found in both earlier and more recent work on community college/high school collaboration. A list of these case studies should include:

Van Patten, Dennison, and Anne (1987) who describe a series of community college/high school partnerships in California, Ohio, Texas, Florida, Maryland, Arizona, and Illinois, including Tech-prep and dual enrollment programs.

Greenberg (1992) identifies the various forms that high school/college partnerships may take. These include concurrent enrollment, enrichment, compensatory

and motivational designs, teacher-to-teacher collaboration, Middle Colleges, mentoring and tutoring, teacher training, and academic alliances (pp. 3-4). Greenberg also includes a list of issues to be aware of, and actions that college leaders should take when contemplating partnerships with high schools. These include: identification of the student population, establishing contact with local high schools and school districts, determination of costs, development of community support, and development of evaluation instruments for program improvement.

Nunley and Gemberling (1999) describe the activities of the K-16 Council in Maryland to improve the college readiness of a student population of recent high school graduates who were assessed into remedial, non-credit college classes. Focus groups of these students were surveyed and the results indicated the students were generally academically disaffected. Based on these results, the K-16 Council recommended more rigorous high school curriculum, early assessment of college readiness, and intervention for non-college ready high school students. Students assessed as not being college ready were encouraged to enroll in summer school at the community college prior to the regular term. Faculty-to-faculty curricular cooperation across the high school/college levels in reading and writing was also emphasized.

A follow-up study by Nunley, Shartle-Galotto, and Smith (2000) documents the initial implementation the state-wide program in Maryland with special attention on the college/high school collaborative effort at Montgomery College in Montgomery County, Maryland. The partnership between Montgomery College and the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) system was extensive; involving targeting 10$^{th}$ grade students deficient in basic skills, data sharing on test scores and academic placement, vertical curricular alignment, and cooperation at the upper administrative and board levels. The cornerstone of the program was an early warning college readiness test (co-authored by high school and college faculty) that was administered to all 10$^{th}$ grade students at four pilot high schools. Implementation problems occurred in bureaucratic communication, media coverage, and negative perceptual issues between the public schools and the community college. The common value of a commitment to student success articulated in a widely distributed policy document plus the commitment of educational leaders at both levels kept the initiative moving forward.

Cavanagh (2003) has summarized the research of David Conley that studied 35 English/language arts exams and 31 mathematics tests in 20 states used by high schools to measure college readiness. When evaluated by college faculty in these areas, only three of 35 English tests were determined by college faculty to receive an A, 18 received a B, and 14 received a C. In mathematics, no test received an A, 29 earned a B, and two received a C. Only in the reading comprehension sections of the English tests did a majority of the state high school tests earn an A from the college reviewers composed of faculty from a consortium of 28 research universities supported by the Association of American Universities and the Pew Charitable Trusts. According to Conley, these tests end up sending "mixed messages" to high school students about college preparedness. Student may pass the high school test at "college ready" level, but still be unprepared for college level work. Better assessment alignment and consultation in test preparation

between faculty at the public school and higher education levels are the primary recommendations of this report.

Hank Dunn (2005) has recently commented on the creation of an Academic Resource Center (ARC) at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. According to Dunn, to remain true to their open access mission and yet not "remain a passive receiver of unprepared students," the college decided to provide an intervention program with high school juniors and seniors in math, English, and reading (p. 4). Sinclair offers ARCs at the feeder high schools in its region. Each ARC offers computer based instruction facilitated by an on-site college instructor. Dunn conceives of the ARC project as a benefit to all major stakeholder groups (students, parents, high schools, and the college). Parents and students benefit by not having to pay for non-credit developmental education when the student reaches college. The high school graduates students of a higher academic caliber. The college benefits by being able to re-direct resources to credit bearing programs. Sinclair paid for the program by using Carl Perkins grant monies, and used recycled computer equipment for the ARC labs. The ARC classes are offered at eight high schools in the Sinclair service area. Each class is small (18-20) students, who move through a series of guided tutorials at their own pace in preparation for a college placement exam offered at the high school.

From this brief selection of cases one can identify seven common threads, some of which pertain to the more theoretical work discussed above. First, there are many different ways that writers identify college readiness programs. Tech-prep, dual enrollment, Middle or Early College High Schools, partnerships, summer bridge and pathways to college are some ways educators conceive of these programs. Some programs like Tech-Prep are federally funded, but most are localized. Programs like Middle or Early College High Schools are national in that they are grant funded through the non-governmental philanthropic sector and based on an agreed upon national model. One could place the continuum of college/high school cooperation across these programs to discern the level of cooperation required for each program (Orr and Bragg 2001). For instance, Early Colleges would be the most integrated (see below), and programs like dual enrollment more representative of partnerships.

This relates to the second factor of planning and the costs associated with each program. College readiness programs are costly and require extensive planning, but if the numbers of students requiring remediation are reduced, they have the potential for substantial savings. Again, these observations reflect Orr and Bragg's identification of structural efficiency as a motivational factor for the development of these kinds of programs. This is especially evident in the case described by Dunn (2006).

Each program described involves some form of applying a more rigorous curriculum for high school students. Even students who are assessed as at-risk of dropping out of high school are encouraged to pursue a high level of academic course work. There is strong evidence that a more rigorous curriculum improves the chances of academic success in higher education (*Education Trust* 2001). Only one of the programs described above (Dunn 2006) discusses what to do with students who do not possess a basic level of skills in subjects like reading and writing to enable them to be successful in more rigorous classes. These students should be identified no later than the 10$^{th}$ grade and provided with the equivalent of developmental courses while still in high school. Again, the program at Sinclair Community College (OH) described by Dunn (2006) describes this kind of early intervention at the 11$^{th}$ grade level. These types of programs can go a long way to break the pattern of giving academic advantages to students who already have them.

To design a more aligned curriculum, many of these cases discuss the importance of curricular alignment designed through faculty-to-faculty collaboration across the college/high school educational levels. Nunley, Shartle-Galotto, and Smith (2000) discussed the difficulties of this type of collaboration caused by negative perceptions of

high school faculty of the community college as an educational choice for their students. There is an extensive literature about the perceptual difficulties encountered by America's community colleges too vast to explore here; but the perceptual issues raised by the Maryland case in the faculty-to-faculty cooperation required to better align college and high school curriculum raises some interesting questions about possible difficulties that might arise as colleges and schools work together to increase college readiness.[11]

Azinger (2000) in an article in *New Directions for Community Colleges*, has briefly touched on some issues of emanating from the different educational cultures of high schools and colleges the difficulties that might arise from these differences. Most of the issues pertain to the divergent missions of the two sets of institutions; the custodial nature of public schools who care for legal minors, and community colleges who provide comprehensive lifelong learning for adults. The academic and curricular culture of the public school is more tightly controlled by central office administrators and school boards, than the curriculum of the community college which reflects the tenets of academic freedom derived from the university. In this dissertation I will explore the nature of these difficulties through a better understanding of the process of collaboration at South Texas College.

In 2000 Azinger perceived that calls for greater collaboration between community colleges and high schools were coming from leaders within higher education concerned with the high level of remediation having to be offered at the collegiate level. He,

[11] Again, in keeping with the action research, participant nature of this project, in 2007 I was named to a legislatively mandated state-wide curricular alignment team for the social sciences. This team has developed college readiness curricular standards that are to be implemented over the next several years in the State of Texas. This team has counterparts in the natural sciences, mathematics, and English/language arts curricular areas. Each team was composed of higher education and high school faculty.

however, found no panels at the American Association of School Administrators National Conference in 1999 dedicated to college/high school collaboration. To him this implied potential resistance to these efforts on the part of school superintendents and high school principals. While high demand for remediation at the college level is still a concern (see Chapter 1, pp. 11-14), there is strong evidence that statewide policymaking bodies at both levels are calling for greater emphasis on college readiness and the requisite collaboration that should accompany it (see below).

The fifth and sixth commonalities derived from the cases surveyed above concern early assessment and adequate information sharing between educational levels that is reminiscent of the signaling theory utilized by Kirst and Bracco (2004) and Bueschel (2004). Nunley and Gemberling (1999), Nunley, Shartle-Galotto, and Smith (2000), Cavanagh (2003), plus the work of David Conley (2005), concern, in some ways, the lack of assessment and curricular integration between the college and high school educational levels. Beyond the potential difficulties of developing better vertical curricular alignment discussed above, assessment alignment will have to come from the policy level and move downward to the K-12 educational levels. In this reform element, however, high schools may resist if they perceive more rigorous standardized tests and college preparatory curricular changes as threats to their graduation rates and their legitimacy. Central to all of these aspects of college/high school collaboration are better communication and information sharing between educational levels. High school students, through counselors, teachers, administrators, and their own families, need to be informed about the nature of college level assessment, the ramifications of low "cut" scores. High school

students should be assessed sooner, and intervention strategies similar to those used at Sinclair Community College should be employed.

Finally, these cases, in various ways, illustrate the value of leadership in the implementation of community college/high school collaboration. Leaders at both educational levels must be supportive of the kinds of changes demanded by greater collaboration. Faculty leaders must first understand the nature of the issues, and then overcome their institutional biases to carry forward the kinds of activities associated with curricular vertical alignment. Outreach leaders must understand that setting up informational tables on "college day" at the high school is not the kind of deep, comprehensive college-readiness package of services demanded by signaling theory. College presidents, school superintendents, and high school principles must be committed to sharing information, resources, and facilities. None of these changes will be easy and a better understanding of the processes involved in these changes can be helpful for both college and high school leaders.

Because I have identified the *Middle College High School* (MCHS) as one of the most comprehensive model of high school/college collaboration, and the most promising for avoiding the class biases of other high school/college programs, I will briefly describe this concept.

**The Middle College Model**

Middle Colleges represent a high level of integration between high schools and community colleges. They have the added benefit of intentionally not being meritocracies like other programs that offer college course offerings for high school

students. The Middle College model is exemplified by the original Middle College High School at La Guardia Community College in New York City. The school/college is jointly administered by the community college and the New York City Board of Education. It combines the last two years of high school with the first two years of college, and provides students with intensive counseling, small classes, interdisciplinary curriculum, and career guidance (Barefoot and Siegal 2005). Because of its intensive nature and small class sizes, middle colleges are traditionally limited to 100 students per junior and senior level cohorts (*Middle College National Consortium*).

The procedures for the implementation of middle college programs are developed collaboratively through planning seminars and joint meetings to set goals and priorities, and establish the details involving curricular and administrative aspects of the middle college. An overall project administrator is also chosen to write a concept paper outlining the middle college's mission and the requirements, contributions, and commitments of middle college partners (Cunningham and Wagonlander 2000, pp. 42-43). Middle college administrators (especially the project director and the project liaison) should include individuals from both the community college and the K-12 systems.

Similarly, funding and budget planning is jointly run buy high school and community college administrators with the support of their respective school boards and boards of trustees (Cunningham and Wagonlander 2000, p. 43). Planning for the middle college began well in advance of the college opening its doors. Administrators, faculty, and staff at the middle college began collaborative meetings two years in advance of opening the school.

The student population of the middle college is a specially selected at-risk population. At La Guardia, "at-risk" is defined as: Students who have failed three or more foundation courses in math or English, and been truant for more than forty days during the last year of middle school, or their first two years of high school (ibid). The philosophy of the middle college is to academically socialize and empower these students. These are students who have not previously displayed any of the academic or social traits generally associated with college readiness. Middle Colleges are designed to improve the self-esteem, as well as the cognitive abilities of these students. Middle Colleges and other more intensive college/high school collaborations have shown that a "rigorous educational experience can counteract the formidable barriers to success that disadvantaged students encounter" (Levinson, 2005, p. 208).

Middle colleges' and now Early College High Schools enjoy a variety of foundational support from organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Kellogg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and DeWitt Wallace Readers Digest Fund (*Middle College National Consortium* 2005).

An integral part of middle college design and implementation is community outreach and parental support. Middle college staff, which includes social workers and counselors, meet regularly with students and their parents to share both the problems and successes of the students (Cunningham and Wagonlander 2003, p. 46). Parents are updated on a regular basis on their children's progress in the middle college and are frequently invited to the middle college campus, which is located on the community college campus. Because of this, community colleges need to protect themselves against

legal liabilities in areas of *in loco parentis,* minor student contact with an adult student population, sexual harassment, signed parental waivers, and student codes of conduct (Lugg 2000). Faculty and staff working at middle colleges, or any other P-16 initiative that brings minors to a college campus, also need adequate professional development and training when dealing with a population composed of legal minors (ibid).

Because Middle Colleges are designed for students determined to be "at-risk" through a variety of measures, they can avoid the class bias of other merit based school to college programs. They represent a good example of community colleges fulfilling their commitment to open door admissions and the democratization of higher education. However, because enrollment in Middle Colleges is purposely kept small, it is impossible for them to raise the college readiness of large numbers of high school students. In some ways Middle Colleges can provide a supplement to more extensive curricular and assessment alignment initiatives, and family based outreach programs that I have described in this chapter.

**College Readiness Policies in Texas**

Related to the policy prescriptions put forward by researchers like Kirst, Venezia, and Bueschel, it should be noted that the state-wide policy landscape for community colleges is changing. Palmer (2000) for instance, observes that Oregon began linking high school exit examinations with college ready assessment in the late 1990s. More recently, the policy environment for community colleges and high schools in Texas is providing direction for P-16 and college readiness initiatives. In May of 2006 Governor Rick Perry signed House Bill 1 (HB 1) into law. Although much of HB 1 addresses

public school finance; Sections 2.01, 3.01, and 5.01-5.07 concern some aspect of P-16/college readiness reform (*Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board- Office of Strategic Alliances*/ *Summary of HB 1*). These provisions include data sharing between educational levels, vertical teams to align public school and higher education curriculum, increased rigor in the recommended high school curriculum, flexible schedules, more support for dual-enrollment, and alternative colleges for high school students. The legislation mandates that *end of course assessments for high schools* ("to the extent practicable") should be based on an assessment instrument that can be used to "determine the appropriate placement of a student in a course of the same subject at an institution of higher education" (*Summary of HB 1*). There is no time-frame associated with this provision of HB 1. In other words, a process should begin to design a common assessment for high school exit and college entrance.

On April 20, 2006, Dr. Raymund Paredes, Commissioner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), announced to the Board Commissioners that as a result of his discussions with Commissioner Shirley Neely of the Texas Education Agency (TEA), a collaborative program between the THECB and the TEA will focus on creating a college-going culture throughout the K-12 system in the state of Texas (*Commissioners Report on Higher Education Developing a Statewide Strategy for P-16:Closing the Gaps Between Public Education and Higher Education*). According to Dr. Paredes, this announcement is the culmination of two years of advocacy on the part of himself and Commissioner Neely.

**Closing the Gaps in Texas**

The *Closing the Gaps by 2015: The Texas Higher Education Plan* was adapted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in 2000. The focus of the *Closing the Gaps* initiative is to bring Texas to at least the national average of 5.4 percent of its population enrolled in college. *Closing the Gaps* also notes that Texas lags behind California, Illinois, Michigan and New York in percentage of population enrolled in higher education (*Closing the Gaps* p. 8). The specific racial and ethnic targets of *Closing the Gaps* include:

- Increase the education participation rate for the African American population of Texas from 4.6 percent to 5.1 percent (22,000 students) by 2005, to 5.4 percent (15,000 students) by 2010, and to 5.7 percent (19,300) by 2015 (*Closing the Gaps 2015*, p.9).
- Increase the higher education participation rate for the Hispanic population of Texas from 3.7 percent to 4.4 percent (101,600 students) by 2005, to 5.1 percent (120,000students) by 2010, and to 5.7 percent (120,000 students) by 2015 (*Closing the Gaps 2015*, p. 9).

*Closing the Gaps* also focuses on student success rates and includes the following targets for the African American and Hispanic student populations:

- Increase the number of African American students completing bachelor's degrees, associate's degrees and certificates from 9,000 to 11,000 by 2005; to 14,000 by 2010; and to 16,000 by 2015 (*Closing the Gaps 2015*, p. 11)
- Increase the number of Hispanic students completing bachelor's degrees, associate's degrees and certificates 18,000 to 26,000 by 2005; to 36,000 by 2010; and to 50,000 by 2015.

More specifically, the data reflects the large size of the Hispanic population in Texas. By 2008 Texas will become a "minority-majority" state. Hispanics will account for more than 40 percent of the state's population, with African Americans

representing 11 percent, Whites 45 percent, and Asian-Americans 4 percent, with much of the Hispanic growth occurring in border regions (*Closing the Gaps*, p. 7). According to the latest *Closing the Gaps Progress Report* (2006), Texas is 8.6 percent below its targets in the number of Hispanic students enrolled in higher education for 2005. Because of the large growth in the Hispanic population of Texas, the number of Hispanic students participating in higher education will have to grow by 50 percent between 2005 and 2010 to reach the initial enrollment target set in 2000 (*Closing the Gaps Progress Report 2006*, p. 5). The number of high school graduates who directly enter into higher education is also not increasing in Texas, leaving the THECB to conclude that this suggests "a need to enhance efforts to encourage high school students to prepare for, enroll in, and succeed in college" (*Closing the Gaps Progress Report 2006*, p. 5).

In an extensive survey of legislative actions to increase the college enrollment of Hispanics and African Americans in Texas, Maricela Oliva (2004) has determined that P-16 education coordination is a race-neutral means for closing the achievement gap in the state. Oliva conceives of "college readiness as a series of actions and events that span both sides of the college matriculation boundary" (Oliva 2004, p. 212). College readiness is about getting "ready" for college as well as about "getting in" to college. Many "getting ready" activities have to do with students, their families, their cultures, and what the student brings with them as they make the transitions from public school to higher education.

How these policies are implemented in a state as large and diverse as Texas remains to be seen. It is logical to assume that a community college/ high school

collaborative in the U.S.-Mexico border region of the state will look different than a collaborative in East Texas or the Panhandle region. A better understanding of educational cooperation along part of the border can therefore help policymakers in the state in a variety ways. What characteristics of the Latino (predominately Mexican-American) culture will affect the academic partnership across educational levels? How will socio-political and economic structural disadvantages for this population influence the type of programs to be implemented, and the outcomes to be achieved?[12] How significant will language barriers be in this process, and how can they be overcome? Again, the research to be presented in this treatise will allow policy makers and educational researchers an opportunity to better understand some of these issues.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG HISPANIC STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

### Hispanic Students in Higher Education

For Hispanic families and students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas efforts that focus on one educational sector (like middle school) or content area (like reading) may not be enough to overcome persistent educational disadvantages (Oliva & Nora 2004). National attrition rates for Hispanic students are alarming despite a myriad of intervention programs and reform strategies. An estimated 50 percent of Hispanic students leave high school before graduating (ibid). A 2005 study by the Harvard Civil

[12] According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for the 2004-05 academic term 82 percent of South Texas College students were recipients of federal grants, with 44 percent also receiving state based means tested financial aid. http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool

Rights Project has found that high school dropout rates among Hispanic students were attributable to attendance at high schools where graduation is not the norm (defined as schools where 40 percent or more of ninth graders do not ultimately graduate) (Chapa & Schink 2006). According to the same study, unsuccessful Hispanic high school students also attend high schools that are highly segregated along racial and class lines (measured by those schools with an average of 40 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch) (ibid). Of the one half of Latino students that graduate from high school, 35 percent of these students compared to 27.6 percent of white students begin their higher education at the community college. college level (Kurlaender, 2006). Nationally, 58 percent of Hispanics in higher education are enrolled in community colleges, compared to 40 percent for other racial and ethnic groups (Gandara, 2005). Oliva and Nora call for greater attention to the process of what works in intervention strategies for Hispanic students and not just outcome based evaluations. This information indicates that community colleges are the most likely place to initiate more comprehensive college readiness efforts for Hispanic students; but these efforts must be centered on the family, as well as the kinds of curricular and organizational models discussed above.

There is a considerable literature on the subject of community colleges as an institutional hindrance to students seeking the baccalaureate degree (see Dougherty 1994; Dougherty 2002, for example). Time and space preclude a more thorough discussion of these arguments, but to extrapolate from them, one could infer that the low numbers of Hispanic Americans who possess at least the baccalaureate degree is attributable, in part, to the high numbers of Hispanic students who begin their higher education careers at the community college level. Chapa and Schink (2006), however, find that Hispanic

community college students in the extensive public higher education system in California are hindered from transfer to public universities by factors similar to those identified above as hindrances to high school students preparing for college entry. Factors like inadequate information about testing and assessment, inadequate counseling and advising, and a general lack of information about the time requirements and processes of four-year degree programs are the major obstacles that many Hispanic students face when making decisions about academic transfer. Kurlaender (2006) has noted that Hispanic college students are more likely to choose colleges that are, affordable, close to home, with flexible degree plans that offer courses at night, and that have greater access for part-time students. These, of course, are all attributes of the community college. Hispanic students with close family ties (Rodriguez & Friedrich; Valenzuela & Dornbusch 1994) are more likely to prefer the proximity of the community college and the affordability and flexibility that allows them to work and support families.

**Hispanic Families and the Development of Social Capital**

Valenzuela and Dornbusch (1994) in an extensive survey of 2,666Anglo and 492 Mexican origin students in California found the concept of familism to be a form of social capital important to the academic success of students of Mexican origin. Familism is defined structurally as the presence or absence of nuclear and extended families (pp. 18-19). An attitudinal dimension of familism is the expressed identification with the interests and welfare of the family (pp. 18-19). "A behavioral dimension involves different degrees of attachment and affinity during contact with family members" (p. 19). Dornbusch and Valenzuela find that familism for students of Mexican origin has a

positive relationship to student success if the parents of these students have at least twelve years of public school experience. Dornbusch and Valenzuela attribute the positive relationship between familism and academic achievement to an enhancement of social capital that students gain from being proximate to their families.

**Social Capital**

The concept of social capital is often described as the glue that holds our society together (World Bank 1999, cited in Smith, 2005). Social capital, as opposed to the economic input of human capital, is collectively interactive. Robert Putnam's landmark work *Bowling Alone* (2000) provides a useful reference. It (social capital) is collective trust, it is connective, and can be measured by group membership and participation in social and civic activities (Putnam 2000, p. 19). Sociologist James Coleman highlighted the importance of social capital in context of educational institutions (cited in Putnam 2000, p. 20). Coleman suggested that social capital provided the ties and linkages that benefits individuals in the unstructured free-markets of liberal capitalist societies (Coleman1988, cited in Rosenbaum 2001). According to Coleman:

> Social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that otherwise would not be possible. Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations among actors. It is not lodged in either the actors themselves or in the physical implements of production (Coleman, 1988, p. 98, quoted in Rosenbaum 2001).

Social capital is seen in the size and scope of social networks that exist in a given community (Smith 2005). Social capital can be inward looking bonding agents of trust and reciprocity (and the activities that support them) within groups, or it may be bridging agents of trust in institutions and informal social ties of tolerance and interpersonal trust (Smith 2005). "Bridging" social capital between groups is most closely aligned with

civic engagement. Putnam's research is groundbreaking in that he showed strong evidence that in communities of low social capital and civic engagement schools perform worse, crime is higher, neighborhoods are environmentally dirtier, and public health is worse (Putnam 2000, pp 296-333). Conversely, in neighborhoods with high social capital, children do better in school, crime is lower, streets are cleaner, and people live longer. Even in economically poor neighborhoods, areas with high social capital can overcome some of the social ills endemic to poverty (Putnam 2000, p. 193-194)[13]

In the follow-up to the landmark work of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen (2003) use the example of Valley Interfaith in Pharr, Texas (in the service area of South Texas College) as a builder of social capital for progressive causes at the grassroots level. What is notable about the efforts of Valley Interfaith documented in Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2003) is the value of neighborhood meetings to improve schools and build community relationships for positive social change. Putnam and his colleagues note the power of stories in one-on-one conversations in homes, as Valley Interfaith organizers worked to improve conditions in the *colonias*[14]of South Texas. According to Putnam et.al: "Abstract ideas do not connect

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[13] This is also shown in the *The Socioeconomic Benefits Generated by 50 Community College Districts in Texas* study. This report includes extensive data on improved health, lower incarceration rates, and reductions in the numbers of welfare recipients among Texans with a least one-year of education beyond the high school diploma [Tables 1-12].

[14] *Colonias*, which loosely translates as neighborhoods, are housing developments that cover both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. These developments are characterized by their lack of infrastructure and access to public services (like running water, sewer hook-up, trash collection, and paved streets). Despite two *colonia* specific legislative acts passed by the Texas legislature in 1992 and 1995 to improve the conditions of *colonias*, it is estimated that 20 percent of border residents of Texas live in *colonias* that lack basic infrastructure and public services. The Texas Housing Border Coalition estimates that there were 1,450 colonias in Texas (with most located in Hidalgo County/STC service area) , 54% of which lack sewer hook-up, and have water services other than taps.
http://www.sos.state.tx.us/border/colonias/faqs.shtml http://www.texashousing.org/bc/page2/page2.html

people, and social action, when it is not rooted in the heart of people's life experience, withers in the face of opposition and disappointment" (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2003, pp. 21-22).

Valenzuela (1999) has shown that schools that add, rather, than subtract social capital from students can be beneficial for Mexican American families and students. According to Valenzuela, public schools that track students into an educational system devoid of any relationship to their culture or the language spoken in their homes, ends up taking educational opportunities away from students.

Building on these observations; there is a wide array of research to support that building the social capital for Hispanic families to access higher education must be based on what is culturally valued in these communities. Many of these studies are based on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who used the concept of cultural capital to describe the nuances of social interaction that are often taken for granted (Levinson 2005). Students from different cultures, who speak languages other than English in the home, and whose parents do not possess high levels of formal education and who do not speak English, can often find themselves in an educational world of which they have little or no knowledge. For these reasons many scholars emphasize the unique cultural aspects of Hispanic students and their families, and stress that educators should try to strengthen the social and cultural capital among these populations of students.

Families from all socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups are important facilitators in the process of their children attending college upon exiting the public schools (Auerbach 2004). Students from more affluent families, with parents who have a college education, come to the task of going to college with a "home advantage" in

financial and planning resources compared to students whose families do not have these background characteristics (Auerbach 2004, p. 127). For Hispanic families these gaps have the potential to be larger if these families have some or all of the following characteristics: they do not speak English in the home, work long hours in low paying seasonal jobs, face governmental and legal threats regarding their immigration status, live in substandard housing, and lack an understanding of the costs of higher education and the potential of financial aid programs to help them. Informational "college knowledge" programs for these families must be therefore be "culturally appropriate" (Auerbach 2004, p. 126).

In her study of the *Futures and Families* project in Los Angeles, Susan Auerbach (2004) identifies a program that has many of these traits. The *Futures and Families Project* sought to promote "certain forms of college-relevant cultural, social, and 'critical' capital for students and families of color" (Auerbach 2004, p. 128). Auerbach defines *critical capital* as information designed to develop a critical understanding of educational inequality and the social action required to rectify these conditions (ibid). Meetings with families in the *Futures and Families Project* provided instrumental knowledge about how to navigate the higher education system. Speakers provided information about the complexities of financial aid in both Spanish and English, as well as a variety of other topics. Meetings were held at an area high school and were facilitated by other parents, students, alumni, and teachers. The program was long, with one meeting per month for three years. The program encouraged the development of social networks among parents and operated under the premise that a lengthy sustained

effort would have ripple effects among younger children in the participating families and other non-participant families.

The lessons Auerbach highlights from the *Futures and Families Project* include:

1. Starting early in the student high school career (no later than 10th grade).
2. Meetings should be bilingual, and have small discussion groups in Spanish,
3. Schedule meetings at convenient times for parents.
4. Base meetings on personal stories and include other parents with children in college.
5. Involve students in preparing information for their parents,
6. Gather information from parents about their interests, focus on individual parents.
7. Help parent move through the college planning process as a group
8. Help families develop strategies for overcoming the structural barriers faced by Hispanic families.

The *Futures and Families Project* embodies many of the attributes that comprehensive family outreach programs should possess. Without sustained, empowering contact, outreach programs have limited impact. Projects with these characteristics need continuous evaluation and a deep commitment from all participants. More traditional outreach programs may suffer from a lack of any tangible form of evaluation to measure their effectiveness and thus have no means of improvement.

Quiocho and Daoud (2006) have identified the strong role that Hispanic families can play in the educational lives of their children. Hispanic parents in their study of two large school districts in California wanted to become more involved in the schools their children attended but often felt excluded by negative perceptions of teachers and by language barriers. Definitions of involvement based in the English speaking schools are literally foreign to non- English speaking Hispanic families (p. 257). Many of these families had no knowledge as to how the school system works. Home visits conducted by

bilingual teachers were found to be overwhelmingly effective in motivating these families to play more significant roles in their children's formal education.

Rueda, Monzo, and Arzubiaga (2003) in their study of what they term academic instrumental knowledge (AIK) for Latino immigrant students and their families, specifically seek to avoid a deficit model that "socializes families into the cultural values of white, middle-class standards" (p. 3). The AIK model advocated by Rueda et. al (2003) considers family contexts in developing the knowledge and school culture for these students and their families. Schools should validate and build on cultural differences, rather than assimilate different cultures within a dominant culture (p. 6). Programs that utilize the AIK approach are driven by the voices of the parents and the students. Facilitators of these of kinds of outreach programs listen to parents to determine what kind of information about their children's education is useful for them.

In her analysis of the *Puente (Bridge) Project* in 38 California community colleges, Laura Rendon (2002) defines non-traditional students as low-income students from working class backgrounds who are the first in their families to go to college. These students may approach college environments with a high degree of trepidation and thus the Puente program seeks to validate these students, and again, not place them in a deficit framework. Rendon conceives of validation as a multifaceted approach to college socialization that "lets students know they are capable learners" (Rendon 2002, p. 642). Nontraditional students are assigned a "validating team" composed of a faculty member, a counselor, and a mentor. Validation exercises involving student expressions of their life experiences are integrated in specific classes like English. Mentors, faculty, and staff members develop personal relationships with their students. Mentors are volunteers from

the community who have similar life experiences to the students, and are individuals who have successfully navigated the educational system and achieved positions of leadership in their respective careers.

Learning under the Puente model is interactive. An English teacher explains her main paper assignment as an "I-search" where a student tells the story of their quest for information on a topic of the student's choosing (Rendon 2002, p. 646). In the creation of a student validating learning experience, *Puente* encompasses the positive, culturally sensitive model of community college education that is implied by many of the authors discussed in this section, including cultural sensitivity, rejection of deficit models, a student and family driven approach, and involvement of individuals from the community with similar backgrounds serving as mentors. Most of the programs discussed in this section share some or all of these traits. In Chapter 3 I will present a hypothetical construct of what such a program might look like in South Texas.

## CONCLUSION

The conceptual frameworks identified in this chapter will allow leadership teams at STC to build better collaborative frameworks with the high schools they partner with in the area of college readiness. I have identified historical relationships that place community colleges and high schools close to one another on an inter-organizational level (Gleazer 1973; Vaughan 1982; *The Commission on the Future of the Community College* 1988). Orr and Bragg (2001) and Orr (1999) have provided sound ways to analyze and categorize community college high school relationships. Most important among these analyses are the structural efficiencies that both colleges and schools can

gain from these relationships, and the greater social mobility that potential students can gain through going to college. Also the institutional capacity of community colleges serving large numbers of high schools in their service areas must be considered. Accurate information transmitted between institutions has been identified in the signaling theory posited by Kirst and Bracco (2004) and Bueschel (2004). Policies that support this information transfer are also identified as a significant factor by these authors.

The literature discussed in this chapter has also focused on the social and cultural context of the community college. The region served by South Texas College is overwhelmingly Hispanic/Latino. This fact should have a major influence on how the college interacts with the students and families that it serves in the area of college readiness. The importance of providing the social capital for students who lack the networks that can facilitate their college readiness have been emphasized by Valenzuela and Dornbusch (1994) and Valenzuela (1999). Robert Putnam has established the benefits of building social capital at the community level (Putnam 2000; Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen 2002). Based on the work of Bourdieu, many scholars have studied the importance of cultural capital for Hispanic students and their families making the transition from high school to college (Auerbach 2004; Quiocho & Daoud 2006; Rueda, Monzo & Arzubiaga 2003). Finally Laura Rendon, in her study of the *Puente (Bridge)* project in California has shown the importance of validation for Hispanic students in the community college. From this literature seven specific insights and conceptualizations for a college readiness project at South Texas College are suggested:

1. The natural place that community colleges have historically occupied in relation to public schools, and the common values of open access that exist at both levels.

2. Information sharing across organizational boundaries in the areas of testing and assessment.

3. The importance of leadership and faculty in aligning the curriculum at both levels in a more seamless way.

4. The win-win nature for both educational levels in decreasing the number of students who enter into developmental/remedial education.

5. The importance of community building and the creation of social capital in these relationships.

6. The importance of families and culture in creating positive and nurturing learning environments for Hispanic students.

7. The importance of these students' culture and the necessity of validating these students and valuing them.

This chapter has also shown that community colleges will face increasing numbers of recent high school students in the near future and that proactive college readiness programs are a feasible solution to these demands on their services. College readiness programs are beginning to be backed by policies at the state level, but the particular forms that these cooperative ventures may take are local matters. Because education in the United States at the public school and community college levels is localized, the particular characteristics of specific regions should have a major impact on what these initiatives will ultimately look like. For the South Texas border region of the Lower Rio Grande Valley these collaboratives will be influenced by the Hispanic/Latino culture, and the socio-economic and political disadvantages this population has historically experienced. Moreover, this population is bilingual, bicultural, and closely linked to the family unit. This means that sensitivity to these characteristics should be reflected in the relationships forged between the social institutions of the community college and the public schools in its service area.

Any student leaving high school and entering higher education faces a degree of uncertainty. Students from backgrounds of poverty and from homes where English is not the primary language face challenges different from students from more affluent, English only homes. It is vital to value bicultural/bilingual students for whom they are and the attributes they bring to higher education. It is vital to value the hardworking families that support them, and that they in turn support. Community colleges are ideally located in our educational system to add to the lives of these students and their families.

*Action Research and the Reviewed Literature*

Because this treatise will use an action research method it can be expected that new literature beyond that explored in this chapter will be studied as I progress through the iterative cycles of research (Herr and Anderson 2005). The literature reviewed in this chapter has been used to better frame the issues surrounding the coming together of policies for college readiness, community colleges, and Hispanic students. This literature has been meant to amplify and provide a deeper understanding to these issues and to suggest possible directions that the college readiness project at South Texas College might take. I believe this project will have both practical and transformative effects on the organizations involved, as well as the students and their families who interact with the college and the schools. As a researcher involved in a number of college readiness initiatives I am working to establish certain directions I would like see these projects embark upon. But like the initiatives, as I develop and grow in the conduct of the research, the future of these projects may unfold differently.

# CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In Chapter I identified action research as an appropriate research method to explore the various processes of the college readiness initiatives at South Texas College (STC). This research methodology has been chosen because of my personal involvement in the development of these initiatives. By using this method I also seek both personal and professional growth, and empowerment for practitioners and the students and families the college readiness initiative is designed to serve. In this chapter I will explore more specific aspects of the action research methodology in five ways. First, I will begin by situating action research paradigmatically through a discussion the ontological and epistemological perspectives of this methodology. Second, I will recapitulate the reasons for choosing an action research methodology over other methodologies. Third, specific techniques and methods within the action research approach will be suggested for the case of college readiness initiatives at STC. Fourth, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach will be highlighted through a discussion of the quality, validity, and possible limitations of this research. Finally, I will provide a summary of the ethical considerations that I, as researcher must take into account when engaged in this type of research.

## PARADIGMATICALLY SITUATING THE ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS DISSERTATION

In this treatise I have two fundamental goals. First, internal to the organization of South Texas College, a better understanding of the processes of collaboration with high schools in the college's service area will be developed through qualitative interviews and focus groups with school district superintendents, other public school administrators, and parents in corresponding school districts. The purpose of these activities will be the development of ideas as to how these individuals perceive the issue of college readiness, how they plan to address it, and how they may change their behaviors as the college readiness projects develop. Below I will suggest specific methods as to how this understanding will be arrived at. Second, also external to the college, I have alluded in Chapters One and Two to the importance of families in the Hispanic culture. There is evidence that to be more effective, college readiness outreach in this cultural environment must work more closely with these families. In section three of this chapter I will also discuss a possible way that this outreach can take place in a way that is both collaborative and culturally sensitive.

The concept of paradigm, as I will use it, is the overarching conceptual construct of this body of research (Crotty 2004). According to Thomas Kuhn (1970), paradigms establish the boundaries of research, guide assumptions, and serve as the unifying principles for researchers who conduct their work within a specific paradigm. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) concerned the evolution of paradigmatic thought in the natural sciences and the philosophy of science. While social scientists have not reached the kind of agreed upon paradigmatic lens of the natural scientists that were

the subject of Kuhn's work, the concept has value for social research. Various educational researchers have, for instance, identified major paradigms in the field (Crotty 2004; Guba & Lincoln 1998; Mertens 2005). Though there is some disagreement over the names of the paradigms in social scientific and educational research, they fall under the general headings of:

- Positivism/post-positivism
- Interpretivism/constructivism
- Critical/transformative
- Deconstructivism

(See Crotty 2004; Guba and Lincoln 1998; Mertens 2005)

Because of the multi-sided nature of the research goals of this project, a careful explanation of the ontological and epistemological views that I as researcher assume must be provided. "Ontology is the study of being" (Crotty 2004, p. 10). Ontologically, this dissertation assumes a realist position; that is, there is an objective reality of human phenomena, however, this reality is open to multiple meanings and interpretations by human beings in different contexts and social situations. The interpretivist (also known as the constructivist) paradigm in social scientific research does not use the objectivist epistemological stance of the positivist/post-positivist paradigm. Though the literature is confused on this matter (Mertens, 2005, pp. 12-15 for example), interpretivism does *not* involve the construction of multiple realities. It *does* involve an epistemological position that constructs multiple meanings of a singular ontological reality.

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge or how we know what we know. Guba and Lincoln (1998) state that an epistemology answers the question "What is the relationship between the knower, or would-be-knower, and what can be known?" (p. 210). The epistemology of positivism is objectivist. According to Crotty (2003)

objectivism means "that things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness" (p. 5). For the interpretivist and the critical paradigms, knowledge and meaning are attached to ontological reality by individuals in any number of ways. The goal of researchers operating within the interpretivist or critical paradigms is not the identification and prediction of behavioral regularities in response to objective conditions of existence. These researchers seek a deeper understanding of individuals in the context of historical, social, political and economic conditions and "the lived experience" of people in these conditions (Mertens 2005, pp. 12-13). Interpretivism's methodologies are rich in history and context. Constructionist epistemological thought within the interpretivist paradigm "drives home … that there is no true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations…" (Crotty, 2003, p. 47). In this treatise, for example, I will assume a more interpretive position in my focus on what I, as a college readiness professional can learn from the voices of the educators and parents that I interview.

The goals of the critical paradigm are emancipatory and transformative in terms of the relationship between the researcher and the object of their research. The paradigm is explicitly ideological in that it a takes a position in overturning what practitioners within this paradigm see as the oppressive nature of the socio-political and economic order in modern life. The difference between the critical paradigm and the interpretivist paradigm can be seen in the following quote from Crotty (2003):

> "It is a contrast between a research that seeks merely to understand and a research that challenges… between a research that reads the situation in terms of interaction and community and a research that reads it in terms of conflict and oppression… between a research that accepts the status quo and a research that seeks to bring about change." (p. 113)

The critical paradigm is also much more focused on the sources and effects of power relationships than other paradigmatic approaches to social research. Which of these forces are emphasized and what their effects are is unique to different theorists and theoretical schools within the paradigm. The ontology of the critical paradigm is realist. However, this reality is structured by historical forces and unequal material conditions that will be revealed to the researcher by their epistemological stance and their research agenda. In this project I will assume a critical position in my focus on family oriented college readiness workshops external to the college.

## ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

As I noted in Chapter 1, this dissertation will utilize an action research case study methodology to explore the questions pertaining to nascent college readiness initiatives at STC. A case study can provide context and rich description of the organization where the college readiness initiative is being implemented. According to Merriam (1998) a case study design allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of process, rather than outcomes (p. 19). The organization of STC and related college readiness initiatives will represent what Merriam, citing Smith (1978) describes as the *bounded system* of the research (p. 19). The family-based outreach members I will interview in focus group meetings can still be considered within the bounded system of STC because I am an employee of the college and my goal is gain information, in a culturally sensitive way, about college readiness from representatives of the families of South Texas.

The action research based methods I will describe below are the ways I will employ to gather data within the case. According to Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994)

case study research is a traditional approach within the tradition of the action research methodology. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, case study research has been the long been of the highest potential for teachers studying their own schools (p. 10). McNiff and Whitehead (2006) maintain that case studies are part of the larger interpretive paradigm of social research that seeks to understand what is happening in social situations and negotiate meanings (p. 40); two goals that are fully congruous with this treatise. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) illustrate the use of case studies in the larger action research methodology in descriptions of two projects in China where educators studied Chinese students' ability to learn English, and a case study of student motivation for learning (pp. 119-127).

Robert Stake (2000) has emphasized the importance of case studies to establish context, historical background, physical setting, and other contextual aspects pertaining to political, economic, and social conditions. To establish the historical background for STC a brief historical narrative follows.

**A Brief History of South Texas College**[15]

South Texas College was created as South Texas Community College in September 1993 by Senate Bill 251 of the Texas Legislature. Its service area of Hidalgo and Starr counties on the U.S./Mexico border, were at the time the only bi-county region of the state with a population of at or above 500,000 people not served by an open-access

[15] The information in this historical narrative is drawn from the following sources: South Texas College website http://www.southtexascollege.edu/about/historiclook.html , *A Chronicle of the Conversion of the McAllen Extension Center to the South Texas Community College (1993),* and Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, *Higher Education: Setting the Framework, 1998.*

community college. It is the only community college in the state to have been established by the Texas legislature.

South Texas College began as an extension of the Texas State Technical College (TSTC) campus in Harlingen, Texas in 1986. The McAllen TSTC Extension Center (MEC) was legislatively created to relieve over crowded conditions at the TSTC Harlingen campus (p.8). The original four buildings for the MEC were built by the City of McAllen (using funds from the then named McAllen Economic Development Administration with matching funds from the city). Operational and instructional funding for the original MEC were legislatively provided as special line items under the TSTC Harlingen appropriation. In 1992 the MEC began to receive funding through contact hour formula funding from the state.

Legislation passed in the 72nd Legislature (1992) authorized a review of the Texas State Technical College System to determine issues involving closures, continuation, and/or relocation of the systems colleges and centers. Throughout 1992 and early 1993, based upon the reports of two outside consultant groups, an advisory committee on technical education for McAllen, the involvement of state legislators from the South Texas region, plans were developed for the creation of South Texas Community College (STCC) as a stand alone institution, independent of the TSTC system. In April of 1993 a steering committee of political, business, and education leaders from McAllen visited the Maricopa Community College District in Phoenix, Arizona and consulted with Dr. Alfredo de los Santos, who was then the Vice Chancellor for Educational Development for the Maricopa system.

After the submission and review of a needs assessment/ feasibility study by Dr. de los Santos, legislation (that was introduced earlier in the year) was signed into law by Governor Ann Richards, creating South Texas Community College on June 1, 1993. In July of that year Governor Richards appointed a seven member governing board for STCC.

The legislatively mandated creation of STCC was part of a larger set of legislative initiatives that sought to expand higher education opportunities in the South Texas border region (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, *Higher Education: Setting the Framework, 1998*). These initiatives, were due in part to the public attention resulting from the case of *League of United Latin American Citizens, et al v. Richards* , 868 S.W. 2d 306 (Tex. S.Ct. 1993), as well as earlier cases in the 1980s focused on issues of equity in public (K-12) education in Texas. In this case, the Texas State Supreme Court ruled against the plaintiffs, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and other Hispanic American and Mexican civil rights groups (including the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund [MALDEF]). The decision in this case represented a defeat for those attempting to *constitutionally* require more equitable access to higher education in the border regions of the state. However, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s higher education institutions from Brownville to Laredo were statutorily reorganized and made part of larger university systems in the state and significantly larger state appropriations for higher education were allocated for the region. The creation of STCC marked an important component of these larger initiatives.

The need for an open-access community college in the underserved counties of Hidalgo and Starr was also fueled by population growth and other demographic trends.

According to a report from the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (*Higher Education: Setting the Framework, 1998*), in 1994, 34 percent of the border region's population was less than 25 years old (p. 50), compared the percent for the state of 30 percent. These trends plus the legal and statutory developments noted above all contributed the founding of South Texas (Community) College in 1993.

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe the kind of contextual research used in this treatise as laying the ground work for the commencement of action research. They state:

> In designing the action research project, one way to begin is to ask what is already known about the question or puzzle that is the focus of the inquiry. Institutions accumulate quite a paper trail, documenting through memos, statistical data, policy guides, external regulations and the like- all of which can be analyzed in relationship to many of our research questions. (pp. 78-79).

One method I shall employ is to conduct such a document and organizational scan of STC in the college readiness activities already underway at the college. This will not only provide a foundation for the more comprehensive actions I plan to initiate, but will have great practical value for the leadership of the college as they develop their strategic plans for the institution.

**The Value Laden Character of Action Research**

I undertake this research with the assumption that South Texas College (STC) influences, and is influenced by the larger social context in which it exists. Moreover, I assume a value-laden position that college readiness for the Hispanic community of STC is transformative and empowering. Mertens (2005) has identified the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm as one where "people are active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived

experience from the point of view of those who live it" (pp. 12-13 citing Schwandt 2000). She identifies the constructivist paradigm as one where research is "the product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them" (ibid).

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) have also noted the value-laden character of action research. The researcher is inspired to act on values and commitments that "inspire their lives" (p. 23). As a community college practitioner I, for instance, acknowledge my commitment to the egalitarian and democratizing value of the open-door college, and my desire to expand these opportunities. College readiness projects have the potential to be transformative both organizationally and among its potential student population as the college develops new ways to better collaborate with high schools in its service area. Through the opportunities extended to larger numbers of students, and related to the sharing of information with their families, STC can provide more educational opportunities to those who would otherwise not have them; thus becoming transformative and empowering for these students and their families. In this latter role, college readiness initiatives takes the form of social action (Crotty 2004). I assume an "initial point of reference" (Kemmis and McTaggert 2004, p. 569), that members of the potential student population and their families are disempowered because of disadvantages incurred through past and present injustices as well as barriers based upon their Latino ethnicity, poverty, and the obstacles presented by language barriers.

**Methodological Appropriateness and Action Research**

This treatise is about the development of a better understanding of the processes for college readiness initiatives between STC and public schools in its service area. It

also seeks to develop a better understanding and transformation within the potential student population that the college serves. This understanding is directly linked to the applied goal of the research; to help the college improve its initiative for college readiness. Patton (1990) maintains that applied research is a form of evaluation which lends itself to qualitative methods like interviews, document review, and observational notes (p. 10). He also emphasizes that within the various approaches to qualitative methods of inquiry, *methodological appropriateness* should be a criteria for methodological quality (p. 39). I will provide greater detail of specific qualitative methods and techniques below, but in the discussion of the paradigmatic framework of this project it is important to identify that it is appropriate for this project to observe Patton's advice about making sensible decisions about research strategies. He states:

> "Rather than believing that one must choose to align with one paradigm or the other, I advocate a paradigm of choice. A paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favor of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality… *There aren't just two paradigm-dictated choices* (emphasis in original). All kinds of variations, combinations, and adaptations are available for creative and practical responsiveness (Patton 1990, p. 39).

I include this discussion here because I choose to view the methods to be employed and the goals of this treatise through both an interpretative and a transformative/critical paradigmatic lens. By focusing internally on the processes of college readiness as I as a professional implement them, a more interpretative focus is appropriate. The external focus of the project that I will suggest will focus on perceptions of college readiness by educators and representatives of Hispanic families served by the college. These outreach efforts have the promise of being transformative and empowering; thus the

transformative/emancipatory assumptions of the critical paradigm have more relevance. The paradigmatic duality of this research is reflective of major trends and developments in action research. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), based on Habermas (1971), there are distinctions between "technical," "practical," and "emancipatory/critical" forms of action research. Action /participatory action research is "a contested concept" but "there are practical and theoretical convergences" (Kemmis and McTaggert 2000, p. 567).

For Kemmis and McTaggert (2000), the action researcher/participant epistemologically understands that action research is about reflective change on the part of the researcher and the other collaborators in the research endeavor. Participants learn from one another and change the way they approach an issue or a problem. The researcher aims to improve his or her work related performance, as well as that of the organization where they work.

**Why Action Research is Appropriate for this Treatise**

A community college, like any complex organization, can have many aspects and exist in many different environmental contexts (Levin 1998). Community colleges are by their very nature, part of, not separate from, the socio-political environments in which they are located (*ibid*). Levin (1998) has observed that the identity of the community college is shaped by its mission of open enrollment and access (p.2). Community college/high school collaborative projects designed to address college readiness are part of this mission. Community colleges are not just about maintaining their identity; they are about reproducing it in their environmental context (*ibid*). In other words, the open

access mission of the community college can be reproduced by expanding the potential population of students through initiatives like college readiness programs. However, the necessity for these types of programs, the changes involved in implementing them, and the particular directions they might take all lend themselves to the kind of reflective and critical approaches outlined under the general rubric of action research.

Patton (2002) has stated that under a variety of labels ("action learning," "team learning," "reflective practice," "action research," "internal evaluation," "organizational development," pp. 177-178) researchers undertake problem solving, and learning oriented processes using qualitative methods and case studies to show how groups of people reflect on ways of improving what they are doing. Again, the applied nature of this research lends itself to the *action research* label that I will apply to the methodology of this project. This project will consider the implementation of the STC college readiness initiatives as its case, as well as suggestions for possible directions that these initiatives might follow; including that of deeper family-based college readiness outreach. This research will be participatory in that I, as researcher, already work at STC and have already been charged by the president and vice-president of academic affairs to work on college readiness initiatives. As I will detail below, I will ask that my collaborators in this project will allow me to work with them to discover new ways to engage potential students in college readiness. Similarly, the voices and values of the Hispanic families of South Texas will be sought out to better inform the process of implementing a more comprehensive college readiness program. Action researchers' work *with people*, research is not carried out *on* them (Patton 2000). In short, what I learn from the

qualitative methods employed in this research will be used to better inform both me and the leadership of college on the issue of college readiness.

Because of these basic assumptions, qualitative methods within both an interpretive and a transformative paradigm are deemed appropriate (Mertens 2005). Patton (2000) has cast this type of involved, participatory inquiry as naturalistic. Naturalistic inquiry is inductive and developing, rather than deductive and controlled. For Patton (2000), action research is an inductive method used to solve problems in an organization or program. It involves people studying themselves. He states:

> Action research explicitly and purposefully becomes part of the change process by engaging the people in the program or organization in studying their own problems in order to solve those [organizational] problems. (Patton 2000, p. 221).

In action research, naturalistic, evolving methodology, is a given (Herr & Anderson 2005). This research is naturalistic in that it is being conducted in the real settings of public schools, amongst educators and parents.

Action research is change oriented for both the observer/researcher and the organization. As I discussed in Chapter 1, college readiness initiatives aim to improve the way the college interacts with the high schools that send it students, and the parents of these students through the outreach program mentioned above. Also noted in Chapter 1 were four reasons as to why action research is an appropriate research methodology for this dissertation:

> 1. College readiness initiatives at STC is still being developed.
> 2. These programs will involve change.
> 3. The researcher is positioned inside the organization initiating the change
> 4. The initiative has the potential to empower potential students, their families, other members of the organizations involved in the collaboration, and the researcher.

The developing nature of this project is reflected in that the college has already begun collecting and disseminating data on college readiness with high schools in its service area (see Appendix A), scheduling meetings with area school superintendents (see Appendices B1, B2,and B3), and engaged in the preliminary steps of creating an internal administrative position to work full-time on the issue. The changes noted in Chapter 1 are suggested by the literature on the subjects of P-16 integration and college readiness. These include: greater curricular and assessment vertical alignment facilitated by faculty-to-faculty cooperation, information and data sharing across organizational boundaries, the role of leadership in facilitating the trust necessary to carry out this level of collaboration, and the expanded and more comprehensive role of outreach to the families and communities served by the college. Because this treatise is applied research with the intent of improving and enhancing the college readiness initiatives at the college, under the action research framework it can be viewed as empowering. It is empowering to the researcher because he engages in self-reflective activities regarding professional growth and development. Outside prospective participants in the project (parental groups) will be invited to share their ideas and have their voices heard in designing more in-depth outreach components to the college readiness initiative. These voices that may not have been taken into account in earlier outreach efforts.

Ford (1999) has observed that action research is uniquely appropriate to the needs of the community college. Ford conceives of action research in highly practical terms, defining action research "as a systematic process of studying one's own practice to find answers and practical solutions to pragmatic problems" (Ford 1999, p. 6). Ford identifies the basic steps in the process of action research:

1. Identify the issue or problem
2. Compile and gather data
3. Devise a plan
4. Implement the plan
5. Evaluate the results

(Ford 1999, p. 6)

Ford states that this process is a cycle, with the process repeating itself as new information is uncovered at steps two thru five. This simple pragmatic model of action research fits well with what I propose for the internal, organizational aspect to this research project. This cyclical process has been described as the *action research spiral* (Herr and Anderson 2005). In the next section of this chapter I will describe two specific methods within the action research methodology that I believe will be appropriate for the two aspects of the college readiness initiative that I propose to undertake.

## SPECIFIC ACTION RESEARCH METHODS FOR THE STC CASE

*Authors note: Reflective of the evolving character of qualitative research and for reasons of practicality I abandoned the methods of data collection suggested below. Instead I choose to adapt more tradition qualitative data based on face-to-face personal interviews with school superintendents in three school districts served by the college, focus groups with teams of curricular leaders, counselors, and administrators in the corresponding districts, and focus groups with parents the same three districts. Data collection for this treatise involved nine separate activities (three activities across three public school districts). The focus groups with the parents were bilingual and facilitated by a bilingual volunteer. Because of these changes, the action research nature of this project has evolved into one where I, as an education professional working on college readiness projects for the college, will be better informed of the perceptions of college*

*readiness by these educators and parents in these districts and thus be able to design and implement more sound college readiness initiatives for the college. I will also share my insights with the leadership of the college as they plan for the future development of the college in this area.*

This action research project begins with the *plan-act-observe-reflect* iterative cycle that is based on the work of Lewin (1948) cited in Herr and Anderson (2005). The fundamental goal of developing a more comprehensive college readiness project forms the basis of the plan. I, as internal action researcher begin the process of planning internal teams, which will eventually expand to reach deeper into the communities served by the college. This goal orientation conforms to the *intentionality* and practical outcomes that characterize action research projects (Ludkin 2004). This basic structure fits with what Ladkin (2004) calls "first-, second-, and third-person inquiry" within the action research methodology. (p. 538). First person inquiry means that I as researcher am positioned inside the college readiness project. As an introspective facilitator of the college readiness project I must be aware of my own biases and predispositions regarding the project. Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest the best way to accommodate this position within the research is through the use of autobiographical data. I, as action researcher will keep of a daily journal of the lived experience of the action research process. According to Herr and Anderson (2005) the autobiographical journal serves as "the chronicle of research decisions; a record of one's own thoughts, feelings, and impressions; as well as a document reflecting the increased understanding that comes with the action research process" (p. 77). Moreover, the journal serves as a record of ethical choices made by the

researcher and their consequences (ibid). The autobiographical journal will reflect the professional growth and development for me as the researcher; an element central to action research methodology.

According to Ladkin (2004), second-person inquiry involves "face-to-face encounters between individuals in small groups" (p. 539). The groups' focus can range from the "here and now" to an "issue of common concern and interest" (ibid). In Chapters One and Two I have suggested that information sharing and faculty-to-faculty cooperation and planning are key elements of college readiness collaboration between community colleges and high schools. Reason (1994) describes the process of co-operative inquiry as one in which one or more group members initiates the inquiry and serves as a facilitator of the inquiry process (Reason 1994, p.3). According to Reason (1994), co-operative inquiry takes place in four phases:

1. The group of co-researchers agree on an area of inquiry (improving college readiness through college/high school collaboration). The group agrees to a set of research propositions and agrees to a set of accompanying procedures by which they will observe and record their own and each other's experience. This considered *propositional* knowing.

2. The group applies these ideas and procedures in their everyday life and work. They initiate agreed actions and observe and record the outcomes of their own and each other's behavior. This is considered *practical* knowing.

3. A full immersion process takes place, where the co-researchers the activity and experience. Some may become bored, disengaged, overwhelmed, preoccupied, and fail to carry out the agreed upon procedures. This is considered *experiential* knowing.

4. After a period engaged in stages two and three, the co-researchers consider their original propositions in light of experience and reflection. This completes the cycle and the co-researchers return to propositional knowing. (Reason 1994, p. 4)

This aspect of the research will be constructivist/interpretivist epistemologically. Herr and Anderson (2005) state that group based action research is of *practical interest* to the organization and involves "gaining understanding through interpretation" (p.27). . The acquisition of knowledge in this way is meant to guide practice and inform decisions that the college may make about its college readiness programs.

Third-person inquiry and research (under the action research methodology) is designed to reach a wider range of people who may not have the regular face-to-face contact, but who also share a common interest (Ladkin 2004 citing Reason and Torbert 2001). By meeting with and hearing the voices of Hispanic families of potential students this aspect of my research will represent "mutually-enhancing exercises of power that invite third persons into first, second, and third person practice" (Ladkin 2004, quoting Reason & Torbert 2001, p. 538). Peter Reason's conceptualization of Participative Action Research (PAR) is a well developed model of the kind of "third person" research that I will undertake in this project. The primary task of PAR is the "enlightenment and awakening of common peoples" (Ladkin 2004; Reason 1994 citing Fals Borda & Rahman 1991). PAR seeks to understand the lived experience of people who are in a situation of political and economic disadvantage (Reason 1994). PAR, through activities like community meetings, seeks to find the value of the voices of these individuals as they tell their stories (ibid). These meetings should provide open forums for discussion on an issue (like the college readiness of students), and a place to begin the process of change.

In Chapters One and Two I identified the importance of Hispanic families in building the social and educational capital of students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Given my positionality as a white, non-Spanish speaking action researcher I will need collaborators and *critical friends* to help facilitate family based, bilingual workshops. Critical friends are defined by Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) as insiders who play the role of "devil's advocates" in forcing the action researcher to consider alternative explanations for gathered data. . As I also discussed in Chapter Two, it is important to listen to parents in the information they require to help their children succeed in school. . Reason (1994) terms this initiation as an "intervention" to start the dialogue with a formal objective (p. 8). Listening to the voice of the parents and the families will validate their culture, their opinions and their insight, similar to the validation of Hispanic/Latino college students emphasized by Rendon (2002). A draft narrative description of what this "intervention" should look like would be similar to the following:

> We should be sympathetic to the economic and social conditions of these families. Students who have to work, time constraints, family obligations, etc. should be taken into account. How can we acknowledge and understand these factors and still help students go to college? We should encourage networking and the formation of educational/social capital as much as possible. Social capital theory should guide all activities. We can offer our own internal training for facilitators in these approaches. Most importantly we should practice the art of listening. We should see the value in people taking the time to care, to share their ideas with us, and to seek better lives for their children. We should meet with these families in their neighborhood community centers, their elementary school cafeterias, their churches, wherever and whatever they define as a common or public space.

. From meeting with families I will derive entries for my autobiographic journal. I will also ask my collaborators and critical friends to report their observations of the evolution of the workshops. . I believe these encounters with the families of South Texas will help me as an outsider to their culture and lived experience become a better educator within this community. . I will also be applying what I hear from these families to the

decision-making processes at the college as much as possible, and thereby empowering them by adding their voices to internal operations of the college.

PAR is a democratizing, transformative method that operates within the critical paradigm (Reason 1994). I have a goal of giving voice and empowerment to these families within an educational, economic, and socio-political system that has not often heard them. PAR moves the action researcher beyond the introspection and professional growth of first-person action research, and the pragmatism and intrepretivism of the second-person organizational improvement discussed above. This form of action research explores how understandings are distorted by power relations (Herr and Anderson 2005).

As I discussed in Chapter One, Zuber-Skerritt (1992) has argued that the action researcher can move through stages within the action research methodology; from technical inquiry, through practical inquiry, to emancipatory action. Through the PAR based family college readiness workshops I hope to achieve this kind of evolution in my research.

## VALIDITY AND CREDIBILITY OF THE ACTION RESEARCH METHODS PROPOSED

Guba and Lincoln (1989) equate credibility with validity in qualitative research. According to Mertens (2005) credibility means that there is correspondence between the way respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays

these responses (p. 254). Herr and Anderson (2005) link five validity[16] claims to the goals of action research (pp. 54-57).The goals of action research are identified as:

1. Generation of new knowledge
2. Achievement of action oriented outcomes
3. The education of both researcher and participants
4. Results are relevant to the local setting
5. A sound and appropriate research methodology is used

Herr and Anderson associate different forms of validity with different aspects of action research. Process validity is associated with to what extent problems are framed and solved in a manner that permits on-going learning of the individual or system (pp. 55-56), and is associated with the generation of new knowledge.

The results I will present in this treatise will be based on a process of careful analysis of qualitative data that will reexamine original propositional knowledge. Also, this insight will be based on multiple perspectives and data sources from both educational professionals and parents of prospective community college students.

Related to these multiple perspectives is the concept of democratic validity (Herr and Anderson 2005, p. 56). Democratic validity refers to the level of collaboration and how well multiple perspectives are taken into account and establishes that results are relevant to the local setting. By adding the perspectives of families of potential students, and by seeking to include the perceptions of college readiness from outside the college, this treatise can achieve greater democratic validity. Also by including the voices of Latino families in the STC service area this project can achieve catalytic validity. The action research methods I propose in this treatise are transformative for families, and for

[16] While Herr and Anderson (2005) acknowledge that *validity* in the positivistic/post-positivistic sense is not a goal of action research; they use the term because it is most familiar to social-scientists trained in the positivistic traditions.

me as action researcher. The goal of this project is that these understandings, through the acquisition of new knowledge, and the input of new voices will change the college readiness initiatives at STC in a deeper, more comprehensive, and more sustainable way.

Dialogic and process validity involve the generation of new knowledge. They relate to democratic validity in that they come from collaborative inquiry and the sharing of ideas and insights among co-inquirers and significant friends.

Outcome validity refers to goal-oriented approach to action research. It is the most pragmatic aspect of action research, and concerns the operational improvements that come about as a result of the action research endeavor. Obviously, one cannot assess outcomes until the project is complete, or at least begun. After gathering and analyzing the data from the interviews and focus groups I should be better able to asses the outcome validity of the project. Herr and Anderson (2004) consider iterative cycles and evolving research over time to be similar to the prolonged engagement used in ethnographic methodologies (p. 59).

For Reason (1994) validity for co-operative inquiry (second-person/group based) action research comes from the method's "critical subjectivity" (p.5). Acceptance that knowledge comes from a perspective, and that this bias is communicated to others is a central component of critical subjectivity. Focus group members among the professionals in the public schools will be asked to identify their organizational position and be forthright in their advocacy for these positions. According to Ladkin (2004) citing Reason and Bradbury (2001), beyond the overall pragmatism of the action research project, new ideas and concepts will emerge from action research. This emergence will

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They generally accept the naturalistic interpretations and research goals of trustworthiness, and credibility

take place through the democratic and collaborative techniques discussed above and "the extent to which the research takes into account a number of different ways of knowing" (Ladkin 2004, p. 539, citing Reason and Bradbury 2001). Reason (1994) makes a similar appeal at the conclusion of his article where he "speculates how the three processes" of action inquiry (individually based action research), co-operative inquiry (group based action research), and PAR (community based action research) might come together. These multiple perspectives represent a form of triangulation similar to that used in other methodologies within naturalistic inquiry (Herr and Anderson 2005). The research framework used in this treatise gains further triangulation by gathering data from three sources clustered within three distinct school districts. While action research because of the researcher's inside positionality, and value-laden perspective, differs from other forms of qualitative research; in regard to triangulation it mirrors the strengths of other qualitative methodologies.

**Positionality, Biases and the Generalizability of Action Research and this Project**

It is a given that bias and subjectivity are part of one's positionality in an action research project. These biases will be, for instance, confronted thoroughly in my autobiographical journal..

As stated above, as a white, male, middle-class professional, who does not speak Spanish, and is not from the region of this study, I am a contextual outsider to families and students affected by the college readiness initiative and partnerships between the community college and the high schools in the college's service area. I may also be

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(p. 50).

considered an outsider to bilingual professionals already working in the region. Furthermore, as an insider to the community college I am biased toward the value of the college and the democratizing force of the community college within the community served by the college. According to Leslie Roman (1993), researchers engaged in this kind of research possess politicized subjectivity and "prior beliefs and structural interests" (p. 281). In a critique of traditional ethnography, Roman maintains that researchers should avoid being "voyeuristic" in their attempt to quickly enter a community and extract information or "intellectual tourists," disengaged from their subjects and theoretically "mystified" in their acquisition of knowledge gained from their qualitative work (Roman 1993, p. 284). To overcome these biases and predispositions, I as researcher, must acknowledge my positionality to my subjects and "be forthright in my rationale for conducting the research" (p. 290). Indeed, the action researcher in their goals of transformation and empowerment seeking to accomplish what Roman characterizes as "altering the social relations" they encounter (p. 294). By acknowledging my positionality I can learn from it. Through the research process I can emerge with a better understanding of a community that in many ways I am not a part of, and this understanding can in turn help others in similar situations.

Beyond making clear my assumptions, biases, and goals to my subjects, I am compelled ethically to maintain confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and the non-use of identifying referents for persons and places (Roman 1993, p. 296). I overcome the limitations of typical ethnographic/naturalistic research by using what Roman describes as *double exposure*. Double exposure means that the interviews, group meetings, and personal accounts of my research are not "dislocated from either specific

social relations between researchers and research subjects or from ethical and political choices in methodological decisions" (Roman, 1993, p. 307). When I encounter political and social questions in my research I should not ignore them as I might in a more traditional, value neutral ethnography, rather I should acknowledge them and learn from them.

The generalizability of action research is in keeping with the concepts associated with naturalistic generalization identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The concept of *transferability* is used by Lincoln and Guba to place "the burden of proof" of generalization on the person who seeks to apply naturalistic qualitative research, rather than the original researcher. The research I am proposing here will add a valid description and understanding of the context of South Texas College's efforts to create to more comprehensive college readiness initiative. In this, the project can have great benefits for the educators at the college and the communities served by the college. It may or may not have insights and applications for colleges in similar contexts. Other practitioners and researchers will have to make those determinations for themselves.

## ETHICAL ISSUES IN ACTION RESEARCH

Because action research is evolutionary, action researchers must be careful to continuously exercise professional judgment throughout the research process (Herr and Anderson 2004). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from all institutions involved in the research must be strictly adhered to at all times. Most of these provisions include: respect of persons, beneficence, and justice. Information must be provided to all participants regarding their consent to participate in the research project. Because action

research is continually changing, action researchers must make all efforts to apprise participants how the research is evolving, and to inform participants what might be asked of them next. Beyond continual IRB update, this process is known as "processual consent" (Herr and Anderson 2004, p. 120), and is seen as a supplement to traditional informed consent procedures.

Because action research is by its very nature collaborative, it is based on principles of trust, reciprocity, and parity (Herr and Anderson 2004, p. 120). Action researchers must be aware of their positionality, power relationships, and the avoidance of having "captive audiences" of co-researchers. The principle of fairness and voluntary participation can help overcome these potential problems. Action researchers should ask potential participants in the research what kinds of conditions will freely allow them to participate as openly as possible (Herr and Anderson 2004).

It is important to remember that action research is research *with* rather than *on* human subjects (Herr and Anderson 2004). Decisions in an action research project are a shared process. Observations are continually returned to group participants and these participants have repeated opportunities for input to the research process. In fact, it is these aspects of action research that are integral to the empowering nature of the methodology. Because group members are not research subjects, but agents of change, they are treated with the dignity and freedom they deserve as "reflective moral agents" (Herr and Anderson 2004, p. 124). In this regard, the careful and methodologically self-conscious action researcher is ever mindful of the ethical qualities of his or her research.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I have outlined the ontological and epistemological foundations of the action research methodology to be employed in this treatise. I have established why an action research case study methodology is appropriate to develop a better understanding of the college readiness initiative at South Texas College. I have also more specifically discussed the individual (first-person), group-based (second person) and community based (third person) methods and techniques to be used to develop a better understanding of the process developing a college readiness initiative at South Texas College.

Ontologically, the research I undertake in this treatise assumes a singular reality. However, how I come to know this reality epistemologically is contextual and interpretive. As I have noted above, because I am addressing practical issues internal to college, and external transformative and empowering issues among the families of potential college students, I am studying the development of the college readiness initiative through two paradigmatic lenses; an interpretive lens, and a critical/transformative lens.

This understanding has the promise of enhancing my personal and professional growth, and the empowerment of families living in the communities the college serves. A better understanding of the processes and potential students and their families served by the college can have positive practical implications for the leadership teams at the college facilitating these initiatives. The knowledge gained from the families of potential students can benefit the college leadership in developing a better understanding the population it serves. As an insider to the college, yet an outsider to the Hispanic/Latino

population of South Texas, I too can develop a better understanding of the people I am committed to serve. In knowing these families I can become a better educator. The added benefit of an action research strategy among this population is that their voices will become clearer and they will be empowered. Again, this view is overtly political, in keeping with the critical lens upon which it is based.

In this project I will specifically use traditional qualitative methods (personal interviews and focus groups). The use of multiple data collection strategies within the action research methodology strengthens the credibility/validity of this project. This project will employ methods and techniques that possess pragmatic validity based on the improvement of process, democratic validity based on multiple techniques, and catalytic validity based on the promise of transformation for participants in the project. The project will help the leadership of the college generate new knowledge about the implementation of the college readiness initiative, and the population that it serves.

Finally, this project will be guided by strict ethical considerations. All participation in this project will be purely volitional. I, as researcher, will treat all participants with the courtesy, professionalism, and dignity they deserve. Action researchers must be perhaps more mindful of these virtues because they are asking people to help them do their research. Action research, like democracy, and like "democracy's' college," is empowering; but with empowerment comes the responsibility of ethical behavior.

It is my belief that this project can represent the continuation an experiential learning process that I embarked upon in May of 2005. I believe that an action research based dissertation, with the goal of expanding the number of young people from the

Hispanic communities of South Texas having the opportunity to go to college, is a fitting culmination of this phase of my personal and professional development.

# CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

As I have noted throughout this treatise, action research is an evolving process. In March of 2007 due to decisions made by the leadership at South Texas College (STC), and constraints of time and resources, I decided that studying an internal college readiness team at STC would be impractical. Also, forming my own family based community groups would face similar time and resource limitations.

Instead, I decided that for this treatise I could better answer research questions about the nature of the unfolding college readiness efforts in the service area of the college and perceptions of college readiness by interviewing a set of public school superintendents, a corresponding set of instructional, counseling, and curricular leaders in these same school districts, and parents in the districts serving as facilitators for an on-

going parental outreach group focused, in-part, on issues pertaining to college readiness. The members of the parental groups had children, and/or, are the trainers of other parents who have children in the respective school districts.

The selection criteria for the districts was based on an intent to study districts of with differences in size (both geographic and student population). One district studied is relatively small, one is large and more urban, while a third district is large, experiencing rapid enrollment growth, yet more rural than the other large district. I believed these districts would provide a cross-section of perspectives from educators and parents even though these school districts are relatively homogeneous ethnically. Considerations of the timely submission of documents for IRB purposes were also a factor in choosing these districts.

Semi-structured, audio taped interviews were used for the superintendents and the curricular educators and other administrators the superintendents designated to address college readiness issues. I anticipated these interviews would take one-hour to ninety minutes per interview. The average length for each activity was one hour. All university and school district research protocols were strictly adhered to. Semi-structured interviews have the value of allowing the researcher to specifically focus within the scope of the research project (Mertens, 2005, p. 388). For the parental groups, focus groups were used since this part of the data collection involved *teams of parental volunteers* that correspond with the school districts where the others sets of data were gathered. The focus group technique will work well with larger numbers of people and allow the researcher to cover the specific topics and research questions in a relatively short period of time (Mertens 2005, p. 386).

In selecting the passages from the interviews and focus groups to include in this chapter, I selected sections that suggested categories or themes for clustering (Seidman, 2006). Where possible, I tried to draw links and connections to themes that emerged in other interviews and focus group activities. I have included lists of these themes and analyses of these topics at the conclusion of each section of this chapter. Each section is either an interview (three superintendents), or a focus group (three sets of public school administrators/counselors, lead teachers, and three sets of parental volunteers).

## METHOD FOR THEMATIC CLUSTERING IN THIS CHAPTER

My method in identifying the themes for this chapter was to read hard copies of the transcripts of each data gathering activity, highlight (with a marker/highlighter) sections where identifiable themes and topics emerged, and electronically cut and paste these sections into a new document that I labeled "Highlights of Interview/Focus Group 1,2,3." Statements that intuitively sparked my interest were also highlighted. I then used these documents to construct the narrative for this chapter with the corresponding sections on analyses and interpretation of the data. At the conclusion of this chapter I will provide a summary and analysis of all the thematic clusters developed from each set of participants in this study and attempt to identify similarities and difference between them. I will, in turn, use these conclusions in Chapter 5 to answer the six research questions posed for this project and provide a set of related practical recommendations for the college, as well as my own insights gained as an educator and college readiness practitioner.

Though I used similar sets of guiding questions for the superintendent interviews and administrative focus groups, and a separate set of guiding questions for the parental focus groups (see below), each interview and focus group had what Morgan (1997) has termed their own "unique composition and dynamic" (p. 59). Because of this, and because of the ever changing nature of qualitative research, topics that emerged in one focus group or interview would be explored in a subsequent activity. This method, I believe allowed me to explore each emergent theme at a deeper level as I progressed through the data gathering activities. This process was limited in that in the initial activities I came prepared with only the guiding questions (based on the literature explored in Chapter 2) and my own knowledge of the subject. This, in effect, made the first interview or focus group with a particular individual or group a somewhat more limited, yet exploratory activity. In short, I could not probe at a deeper level in these initial data gathering activities, but could gather information that would help me in subsequent information gathering activities.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

Below are examples of the questions I asked the superintendents and the teams of educators that corresponded to each public school district:

Superientendents and educators[17]

Possible Questions for superintendents and educational leaders on the subject of college readiness

[17] It should be noted that these questions served only as guides for the interviews and focus groups, but that given the nature of qualitative interviews and focus group methods the data gathered did not always Sometimes useful insights were gained by the natural flow of the conversations.

1. How long have you been an educator? (initial "ice-breaker" question)

2. How much of this time has been spent in South Texas? (initial "ice-breaker" question)

3. If you had to, how would define college readiness?

4. What are the most important factors for your school district in planning college readiness initiatives?

5. Are there specific operational units within higher education institutions (student services/outreach, information technology/data sharing, academic affairs/curriculum, academic affairs/testing and assessment) you see as important in these initiatives?

6. What obstacles might you expect as you implement college readiness initiatives?

7. What role do you see elected boards playing in college readiness initiatives?

8. How do you view the community college and its role in college readiness initiatives?

9. How do you view the regional university and its role in college readiness initiatives?

10. What do you believe is unique about your district in the implementation of a college readiness initiative?

11. What capital and human resources do you see as vital to a college readiness initiative?

12. How would you define success for the initiative?

Parental Team Focus Groups

For the parental group leaders slightly different sets of questions were asked. Below I will describe the *Abriendo Puertas* (Opening Doors) program that Gear-Up and the Region One Educational Service Center is using to reach families to help them prepare their children for college. This program is led by Dr. Ida Acuna-Garza and Dr. Hector Aldape (Texas A&M University, Agricultural Outreach/Community Development).

I met with focus groups composed of *parental teams* who facilitate meetings and train other parents in educational knowledge and college readiness, and asked them questions about:

1. Problems or challenges they (as facilitators) encounter
2. Parent responsiveness (enthusiasm, attitudes toward educational institutions)
3. Parent participation (high/low)
4. How does the community college ever enter these discussions?
    a. the regional university?
    b. other higher education institutions?
5. Are there any perceived differences in the parent population (i.e. more migrants, bilingual, monolingual)?
6. Other unique aspects of their particular school district
    a. Does the school district play a role in these discussions?
    b. If so, who, (administrators, teachers, counselors etc.)?

These meetings were co-facilitated with bilingual colleagues from STC.

The purpose of conducting parental focus groups was to:

1. Provide a comparison with superintendent and the responses of the responses of educational professionals in the same districts.
2. Provide opportunities for my personal reflection and journal entry
3. To add parental voice to the practical application of college readiness initiatives at STC.

After each of the five parental meetings I hoped to gain new insights for my professional growth; which were recorded in my personal journal to be included in an Appendix.

For reasons of practicality and timeliness my original goal of five sets of these data gathering activities was changed to three. I, therefore, conducted three superintendent interviews, three corresponding focus groups with educational leaders in the three school districts, and three focus group meetings with parental teams from the *Abriendo Puertas* program that correspond with these districts. These activities took place between August 2007 and March 2008. Each interview/focus group meeting was electronically recorded and transcribed. As stated above, each transcript was analyzed and clustered thematically to determine commonalities and differences among the participants in their responses to questions regarding the general subject of the community college and college readiness. Below I will highlight the themes and clusters of information that emerged from these three sets of data gathering activities. At the conclusion of this chapter I will also highlight overarching elements that can be identified from all three sets of data as well as key points of divergence.

As stated above, in Chapter Five I will discuss how the data gathered answers the original six research questions posited in Chapter One and put forward a set of recommendations for college readiness programs at the college, as well as suggestions for future research. These methods will provide three distinct sets of data to better inform future college readiness initiatives at the community college, and facilitate the professional growth of the researcher/practitioner. Finally, through the product of this research, the college leadership might gain a better understanding of the community which the college serves.

## THEMATIC CLUSTERS: SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

The three public school superintendents interviewed for this project were asked questions based on those noted earlier in this chapter. As indicated in footnote one of this chapter, each participant answered the questions slightly differently, and each interview went in slightly different directions. In this section I will highlight the thematic ideas and issues that emerged from each of the three superintendent interviews and identify commonalities and differences across the responses. Following research protocols each superintendent is identified as superintendent one, two, and three. Subsequent sections of this chapter will identify administrative groups and family outreach facilitators as corresponding to district one, two, and three. All district level and personal identifying comments in the transcripts of these interviews and focus groups have been removed. All rules and protocols of informed consent were followed in the collection of this data and signed informed consent forms from all participants are on file with the researcher.

### Defining College Readiness

Superintendent one (S1) defined college readiness as the ability of students to take classes at the university or college level.

"my own definition is students being prepared to take classes at the university…, having the basic skills that allow them to be successful without having to take remediation classes."

This superintendent also stressed to need for greater communication with the post-secondary educational level, both in terms as to how well graduates of the district fare, and in the requirements of for students to be college ready in higher education systems.

"We have to make sure we continue to communicate and see how we can transition our kids."

Superintendent two (S2) looked at college readiness more generally, stating:

"the ability to do the work…and they're (the students) are not going to feel that their school shortchanged them by not preparing them adequately with the skills necessary for them to be successful."

This statement shows a certain level of introspection on the part of the superintendent in that the lack of college readiness could be viewed by the individual student as having been "shortchanged" by the public school system.

When asked, however, at the end of the interview to define success for college readiness this educational leader echoed the sentiments of S1 in providing a definition of college readiness:

"I think the real test would be, let's look at our first year freshmen (in college), how are they doing? Let's evaluate after a year, or even after the first semester, how many of them need remediation, how many of them did it on their own because they were well prepared?"

"I think that'll be the key, this follow up on students … and knowing if they weren't successful, why not, if they were, what contributed the most to their success."

Superintendent three (S3) took a more technical tack on defining college readiness by defining college readiness as a five part continuum having to do with assessment misalignment, accountability systems, students' "soft skills" and the quality of instruction at the public school level:

1. "standards that we have from the state (TAKS) do not necessarily align to college readiness assessments as they are called like THEA"
2. "TAKS right now, I would say assesses maybe 85-95% of what's on THEA"
3. "we don't have an accountability system in place at the high school level that truly aligns with the college regimen of assessment"
4. soft skills
5. quality of instruction. [18]

*Communication and the Role of the Community College*

S3 also noted the importance of communication across educational levels and the facilitative role that can be played by programs like early college high schools. The following quote is illustrative:

> "All we are trying to do is prepare the student who will be successful in post secondary status…so where is an area (of) concern? It seems like communication between you know specifically high schools and university personnel…"

Increased communication across educational levels and the role played by the community college was a theme that appeared in the responses of the superintendents in a variety of ways. S1 for example stated that "communication was everything." In a more extended quote S3 stated that the flexibility of the community college was key to communication and college readiness:

[18] TAKS is the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and is the high school exit assessment that all students must pass at a minimal level to graduate from high school in the state of Texas. THEA is the Texas Higher Education Assessment and is one of three commonly used examinations used by post-secondary institutions to determine the placement and college readiness of incoming students.

> "we see it happen more readily at the junior (community) college level in terms of initiatives we bring out in collaborative partnerships that we begin to establish. We see the work at a more accelerated pace with the college than we do with the university" "…it seems to me, not that I have data to support it" but there is a more caring environment at a (community) college as opposed to a university, at least from my experience."

Of the three superintendents, S3 went the furthest in stating goals for the district that involved breaking down the barriers across the P-16 educational continuum:

> "When you look at yourself as an _____ (deleted for identification purposes)…we begin to see ourselves as seamless transition from elementary, middle school, and high school …we began to see beyond TAKS, beyond accountability, beyond No Child Left Behind" …our greater role which should have always been there anyway and that is to prepare our students to be successful in the world of work and to be successful at the post secondary level, but to see it not from the high school standpoint, to see it from the entire PK-12 and PK-16 perspective."

**Barriers and Challenges Faced By the Districts in College Readiness**

In this section it is important to remember that these districts face challenges in the areas of pervasive low socio-economic status for vast majorities of their student populations, are overwhelming Latino/a serving, with accompanying issues related to English not spoken at home, students from families of undocumented immigration status,

migrant families, and large majorities students who if they attend college would be the first in their families to do so (first generation college goers).

Beyond the factors listed above, S1 noted the need for greater staff development for teachers on college readiness at the curricular level.

> "So I think that if they communicated with our staff and had true communication about those areas that kids are weak in, once you get them at the university or college, and told us that, then we can focus on those things through (things like that) through staff development"
>
> "Maybe community college remedial instructors ought to provide staff development for our teachers." Finding out what they students are weak in and bringing them in and telling our teachers."

S2 was more emphatic when discussing the teachers and staff in their district and obstacles to college readiness:

"One of them is going to be teacher resistance. Those teachers that have done it this way for 20 years and don't want to change, that's one."

"The other one is teachers who feel that 'well it's their (post secondary) job, I already taught them, it's their job, they need to do it.' Instead of us embracing the idea that our job is to prepare the kids."

S2 stated the size of the district, its rapid growth, the high number of migrant families in the district that could be obstacles to college readiness programs and initiatives.

"one of the biggest challenges is our rapid growth."

"Our district is ____ square miles…there is a lot of open land and so there are a lot of families moving in." (deleted for identification purposes)
"The other thing that might (be an obstacle) is the fact that we have a high migrant population. And we have to be prepared to provide the same opportunities for our kids whenever they enroll, and so migrants usually enroll late and leave early."

Finally in this section on obstacles and challenges S3 stated that qualified staff and funding were issues:

1. "highly qualified personnel…broad support from the community, school board…funding"
2. "collaboration from (higher ed. partners) and the finances…I believe (are) critical"
3. greatest obstacle is finding high qualified personnel" "in many instances there there are just not enough qualified educators"

*Overarching Themes and Divergences in the Superintendent Interviews*

The superintendents who gave their valuable time to participate in this research were in the opinion of this researcher honest and open. This is reflective in the level of introspection, and self criticism that was shown in many of their responses. Overall, four themes emerged from these interviews:[19]

1. College readiness was defined by the superintendents interviewed as a future condition of students, having to do with the success of their students when they reached higher educational levels. Students were viewed as college ready if they

[19] I will discuss these and other themes identified in this chapter in the context of the broader literature on college readiness in Chapter Five.

could successfully complete general education courses at the post-secondary level without the need for remediation.

2. This definition leads the superintendents to ask for greater communication from the higher education levels so that they know how their former students are doing, where their deficiencies exist and how as partners, public education and higher education might work to correct the deficiencies.
3. The community college was a better, more flexible partner for these districts in building collaborations for college readiness than the regional university. This is illustrated best in an analogy made by S3:

   "if I could use the analogy of the university is like a big yacht"

   "I would say the district is like a speed boat"

   the (community) college is more like a medium sized boat"

   "the yacht may be turned but it takes a while to see something happen"

   S1 stated this phenomena rather bluntly, "Their (the four-year regional comprehensive university) communication does not exist."

4. Despite the obvious demographic characteristics of the districts, the superintendents noted the challenges of finding highly qualified teachers as the obstacle that emerged first when queried about challenges and obstacles that they faced as they confronted issues of college readiness.

It was, in fact, somewhat of a surprise that the deeper socio-economic factors and factors associated with Latino/a students were not preeminent in the minds of these educational leaders. S2 did mention these factors as noted above, and S1 did mention

financial aid as an obstacle to families, but it is my belief that executive level school administrators take these factors as a given. These educators were more interested in factors that they could control like building better partnerships with higher education institutions, and enhancing teacher quality. This is not meant to imply that these factors are not important, as I will show in the following sections; rather they were not factors that the superintendents spent much of their time discussing.

## THEMATIC CLUSTERS: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR GROUPS

The second set of information gathering activities engaged in for this treatise were semi-structured focus groups with teams of public school administrators in the same districts as the superintendents that were interviewed in phase one of the data gathering processes of this project. Depending on the district, these administrators were "central office" curricular and/or counseling leaders, high school principals, high school and middle school counselors, and/or teachers serving as department heads in core curricular content areas. The variation in these groups across the districts is explained by differences in the way the superintendents in the three districts arranged the meetings, and the individuals the superintendents believed were the key players in the area of college readiness in their districts. The existential fact as to who was available to meet with the researcher for the one to one and half hour focus groups sessions was another factor in the composition of these groups. I believe this diversity of group composition represented a positive value for this project in that a wider range of voices, perspectives, and insights into the subject of college readiness was obtained from the members of these groups.

Each focus group meeting took place in conference rooms within the respective district central administrative offices. The groups were asked the same set of questions as those asked of the superintendents, but the given the dynamics of focus group activity, the responses and conversations went in variety of directions and the questions served as useful guides to keep the groups on task. Each group was recorded electronically and all protocols of informed consent and anonymity were strictly adhered to. Informed consent forms for all focus group participants are on file with the researcher. Written transcripts have been prepared from the audio recordings of these meetings, with individual and district level identifying information deleted.

In the spirit of simplifying complexity, in the sections below I will highlight the themes that emerged from these focus groups by district, with overarching themes from all three districts presented at the conclusion of this section. This is as opposed to the presentation method used in the preceding section (superintendent interviews) where the data was presented by moving across the districts and across a discussion of clusters of common themes.

*Administrator Focus Group One/District One (AFG 1)*

*Defining College Readiness*

Participants in this group identified certain skills and parental education as factors that they saw as necessary for college success.

These participants (composed mostly of high school and middle school counselors) also noted that high school exit was not equivalent to college entrance.

Question: Any other thoughts about how you define college readiness? For yourself or how you define it for your students.

A. And so we talk a lot about that. We focus a lot on TAKS. That seems to be an obstacle for our kids at our campus. We are constantly looking at that and trying to improve those scores, so that they are ready to go in.

When queried further along these lines concerning the depth and breadth of the dissemination of college readiness information at the public schools it appeared that the information was limited to a specific strata of teachers. In other words, it appeared there were gaps in the level of teacher knowledge of state mandated college readiness requirements

Q. Can I change this question just a bit, it sounds like the information is getting to students. Is the information getting to teachers? Do you think teachers are aware that there is a difference between high school exit and college entrance?

A1. How can a teacher not know that? I mean they went through the process themselves. (Researcher comment: Assumes the situation for students today is the same as when an educator might have gone through the college admissions process)

The questions for this focus group then addressed specific curricular programs in the district to improve college readiness. This group noted that specific curricular programs like AVID may have benefit for college readiness; but overall these focus group participants noted discrepancies between high school exit and college readiness and how there were gaps in the level of this knowledge among educators and students.

**Importance of Family Involvement**

The participants in this focus group believed that college readiness extends beyond the classroom to the family. The following exchange is illustrative.

"And I think not only that, but also having the family involved."

A. Because a lot of the families are not well informed. If they were well informed, regarding college and how they could help their child out, sometimes they feel helpless because they have no part of it.

A. I think that would be a tool that will be needed also involving the family.

Q. I'm glad you brought that up and I said I would return to it, so I will return to it. Because so many of our students are first generation in college. The first members of their family to ever go to college, uhm, how, we just touched on that again, about what . . . . what particular types of outreach or activities, either are you engaged in or would you like to be engaged in to work with families? Are there existing programs in your district that you think are very important in this college readiness area or are there some you would like to expand and grow? Is there anything in particular in that family outreach . . . .

A3. Well in parental involvement, I know that our parental involvement is meeting with our parents regarding the drop out rate, regarding how important it is to be successful. Letting the parent know how they can help out, filling out maybe just the plain financial aid form.

The participants then noted a lack of parental participation that grows more acute in the secondary grade levels:

A4. . . . . you see in elementary its not about this at all. A lot of participation in middle school, still some but not as much. Once you get to high school rarely do you see any parents come in. And I think that's important, maybe going out to the community, at the school and . . . . parents, because they do not come in, but once they come in, it's always the same once that do come in. And the ones we need to present to are the ones who do not (come in).

*The promise of more effective family based outreach for college readiness*

The counselors in this group were, however, optimistic that family outreach groups like Abriendo Puertas (affiliated in this context with the federal Gear-Up program) held a promise of greater parental involvement for college readiness. The kind of grassroots parental outreach highlighted in this line of questioning is noteworthy in the context of this treatise.

A. Through the Gear Program we have worked with parents over the last two years and this third year. And they have the different universities, whether it be a group of parents or being chaperons with a group of kids. I know I'm taking my students to Kingsville, we've done STC in Brownsville, Pan Am of course we've gone a lot of times, so they are getting exposed. Of course, we are not targeting every parent as we . . . . but the parents are getting exposed. And through UTPA Gear Up, we also have parents who are getting trained as community liaisons.

A3. We have a group of five parents that are getting trained, we go every month. We receive information about college readiness and they are in turn supposed to go out into the community and train other parents.

A3. And share that information. So it is happening, uhm, does it happen like it's supposed to happen? We don't know, we can't control it, but parents are getting information.

A7. We had our first meeting at a community center down the street, and they wanted more people to come in and so it was a senior citizens area, and so they even invited those . . . . people, but yet they shared their experiences with their own children. And all of them were so proud to share those experiences…

It is important to note the value of shared experience. Auerbach (2004) has noted that among Latino families the shared narrative and common experience is a preferred way to communicate the value of college readiness to parental groups.

*Positive versus negative perceptions of the community college and dual enrollment programs*

At this point, in the interest of time, I shifted the focus to perceptions of the community college among members of the group. In general these perceptions were positive, highlighting the dual enrollment sections offered by the college for those high school students already determined to be college ready. However, some stereotypes of the community college as somehow "less than" the four-year university did emerge from this discussion.

A4. I think it varies at different points in a students life it takes another role. So for instance in high school, there are a lot of kids who are doing dual enrollment. Where without a community college in the city, taking courses for dual credit would be, I guess not as easy as it is now. But, we also see . . . . I know when we've had our discussion among other high schools, there are some parents who say, OK, well I don't want that credit on my child's transcript because it comes from South Texas College or community college. And so those parents have a negative connotation what a community college is

Then there are having some kids do some general discussion in . . . . they say, yeah I took the ACT and I got this score. Well great, what are you looking at? And he says, well I am going to go here. And well that score can get you into a lot of schools, and they say, I already know what I am going to focus on and I have already started some classes while in high school so that I can be done within nine months considering . . . . and those are kids that very I think advanced. They know what they want, they know exactly what they have to do to get it. And they don't really mind if it's South Texas College versus they realize that the benefit is there, but I am going to finish quickly and get out into the workforce and then go on to whatever they want to pursue.

The second part of this response reflects a kind of pragmatism among students that is missing from the negative perceptions of parents of the community college highlighted in the first part of this response.

At this point the positive value of dual enrollment/dual credit course offerings provided by the community college was discussed.

A1. It needs to be . . . . to really . . . . if I'm correct, the partnership STC has with UTPA, those hours do transfer over to UTPA. If there is not only loss at all, there will not be any loss of hours. It is a value . . . to our students. So that's needs to be communicated out because they are our partnerships, that we have three ways, with the district, with the community college as well as with the university. They are working very much towards what is beneficial to the child.

A4. And I think that talking about the standards that the community college has in place, we do need to advertise that more, because going back to that mindset that needs to be broken. Uh, one of the things that I know, and it amazes me, some of my friends kids, that are very savvy with their finances are saying, " I'm going to go here." And you know, they planned their life and they saved. It's a little bit less expensive, so I'm going to take my basics (general education) and then I'm going to move on or go out of state. So uh, a lot of what you all have been saying, goes back to parental influences.

During this part of the conversation the participants emphasized the role played by other outreach programs like Gear-Up. Gear-Up and other outreach activities for students provide what David Conley (2007) has termed the “contextual skills and awareness” of college readiness. These activities provide the “privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and as a culture” (Conley, 2007, p. 15). In reaction to these lines of discussion a participant who had remained relatively silent said something that from my perspective as a former classroom college instructor was quite emphatic:

*Academic skills equal college readiness*

A6. I'd like to see a little bit more emphasis on the academics, I think we need to focus a little bit more in bringing up those levels, skills, in order to get them ready. We can inform them but if they don't pass math, if they don't get passed Algebra I, they never get to these wonderful things that we're setting up for them. So we

> really need to pick up those scores and I think where that comes, and when I say it I say it for all levels of kids, that we need to give them the best opportunity academic wise so that they can succeed. Then the programs that we are talking about can fall into place. My experience, and I have been in an at-risk program for 15 years, one of the saddest things is for kids to have dreams and to see them lose those dreams because academically they are not cutting it.

In the opinion of this researcher, this respondent was saying what good do 'college days' or 'senior days' or even Gear-Up sponsored college visits do if students lack the academic skills necessary to succeed in entry level, credit bearing courses? If students cannot succeed in the classroom then these kind of extracurricular activities lose their meaning.

**Teacher compensation and teacher quality**

When queried about the kinds of resources necessary to improve college readiness these participants were quick to point out the relationship between college readiness and teacher quality. Responses that were quite similar to those of the superintendents.

These counselors viewed outreach as a physical presence of college personnel on their campuses. Beyond a mere presence and promotional activities, these activities are forms of communication of both contextual knowledge of the college system and culture (Conley 2007) and college level academic expectations based on various means of state mandated assessment for college placement. The challenge of a curricular based approach to college readiness was evident in the references to the AVID program and the statement by the at-risk counselor highlighted above, but did not appear to be the major

emphasis of this group. These are themes I will highlight in chapter five in a variety of ways.

*Administrator Focus Group Two/District Two (AFG 2)*

The administrative group from District 2 was composed of central office curricular and planning directors, a high school principal, and a central office director of counseling for the secondary level. A financial planning director was also present. A total of eight individuals were able to attend this meeting after a normal and hectic school day in a rapidly growing district. This group of public school administrators viewed college readiness as a complex phenomena involving factors both internal to their district (curricular issues) and external (knowledge among students and families of financial aid), and socio-cultural issues involving factors common to first generation college-goers. Gender based factors concerning negative stereotypes of Latinas attending college were also discussed by this group. I will highlight these observations below through select excerpts from the focus group transcript.

**Defining College Readiness**

This group quickly zeroed in on the fact that for students, being college ready meant that students would not need remediation when they entered the post-secondary level:

A1. Well when they enroll, when they enroll hopefully they don't enroll in remediation.

Q. When they enroll in higher ed.?

A1. Yeah, I mean hopefully that they . . . they're not enrolled into courses that are remediation type and therefore spending a lot of their financial aid in courses that are not going to count towards their graduation.

Intrigued by responses that meshed well with what many educators are accepting as the most parsimonious definition of college readiness (recent high school graduates who have a high probability of success in credit-bearing, general education college coursework without requiring remediation [Conley 2007]), I queried the group further to ascertain if students and teachers were aware that high school exit did not always equal college placement in for-credit, academically transferable coursework.

Q. How aware do you think your students in your district, how aware do you think they are . . . that that is a possibility? That they may end up in non-credit developmental education?

A1. From a ranking order of 1 - 10?

Q. Well if I were to randomly go into your high school, one of your high schools and ask a Senior, "do you know that completing your TAKS, does not necessarily mean that you won't have to take remedial math or remedial English when you go to college?" Do you think they would know that or do you think that would be a mystery to them?

A2. I think that most . . . well I don't want to say most, but I think that some of them would be surprised to think that they might need remedial classes. I would say that most of them would think that graduating from high school and proud of the TAKS test would mean that they don't. That they won't need remedial . . . I think that's what most will think. They don't think they will need remedial classes.

The response in relation to the knowledge of teachers was different, with the group focusing on placement exams like *ACT* and the relationship between the college placement exam and the curriculum.

Q. What if I ask the same question to a teacher? Do you think they would know that high school exit does not necessarily guarantee entrance into full credit bearing college courses? Do they know that there is a gap between those two things?

A4. I think that they do know . . . they do know and I think that our teachers are . . . becoming more and more aware of that and so uhm, that's why principals . . . and we are beginning to talk with principals about looking at the expectations for example of the ACT, and the SAT. And looking to see what correlations are between the text curriculum and the books curriculum so that certain teachers can become aware of the differences.

**Gear-Up**

Like Group 1, this group saw benefits from the Gear-Up program, particularly for the families of prospective first generation college student.

A1. That grant has really, brought the concept of college attendance to a lot of families . . . a lot of kids that before perhaps had very little aspirations to attend college. But that has allowed a lot of our children to visit the universities and start talking about which college you'll attend verses whether or not they are going to attend college.

At this point in the discussion a central office director directed questions at the questioner about dual enrollment/dual credit sections offered in the district by the college.

**Role of Dual Enrollment and college readiness/Texas Success Initiative (TSI)**

A1. Do you define college readiness . . . can you use it synonymously with dual enrollment? Question directed back to the researcher

Q. Well dual enrollment that's a very good question . . . for our purpose right now we are just defining college readiness as what the state calls TSI, Texas Success Initiative. In other words, it's a score on a test. If you really explore college readiness as a subject, it's a much, much more complex picture than that, but districts and states have to define it in a more limited ways. So for right now, I think for our group, if we can just think of it as, what can the high school do, what can their higher ed. partners, what can they do to work together to lower the number of students that need developmental or remedial . . . education when they get to the post secondary level? So are there obstacles that you face? Are there curricular matters? Are there human resource matter? Teacher qualification? (researcher able to resume questioning)

*Curricular issues and college readiness*

The focus on curricular issues led me to ask a question in the area of curricular alignment and the expectations of higher education faculty.

*Expectation gap between higher ed. faculty and high school faculty/curricular alignment*

Q. Some of those points are issues that might not be at the high schools. But it's also question of the alignment between high school and the college. Do you believe

that for a professor, high school teachers and professors have different ideas about college readiness?

A2. A high school teacher might think he is college ready and so in their eyes, they are preparing them. But yet, a university professor might say who said that these kids are college ready? So it's also that alignment between the high school and the university that could also be considered *impossible***.**

A3. I agree. I agree with both of them. In fact the number one predictor of how well the student will do in college is the number of rigorous courses he/she took in high school.

These educators, in these responses, showed a good awareness of the relationship between a rigorous curriculum and college readiness. It was left unstated how a more rigorous curriculum might affect high school graduation rates and how an educational system with problems in the area of teacher preparation might deliver a more rigorous curriculum.

The discussion then turned to the nature of the partnership between the higher education institutions and the district in building college readiness among the students. Part of this relationship involved supporting students with learning support once they reached the post-secondary level. This group was also impressed with the responsiveness of the community college.

*Community college responsiveness and other higher education partners*

A2. OK. One that we work is with STC, they're very, very, they work very well with us, they accommodate us, they send their people over here, they're here right away. Anything that we need answered, they . . . with service they are very good.

If we need something else, for right now, that I've given one of the persons responsible . . . responsible for this area, for the student enrollment area, which is college classes and I know I've given them headaches, and I know that when I call, I call a day before and I need this or whatever, and he comes through. I know when I call another campus, well it's because we have this and we didn't know well . . . and I know because I work directly with the people that . . . . and another thing that I thought was unfair, to our students and I discussed it with my boss, is that one of the schools of higher ed. institutions, they go ahead and honor our staff with a masters degree. And I mean these teachers also have . . . could teach at the public school and at the university level too, but they choose to be here.

This respondent is saying the four-year institution could, in their mind, allow content specific MA/MS holding public school teachers to teach university courses at the high school, as does the community college through its robust dual enrollment/dual credit program. Universities in Texas do allow MA holding faculty to teach introductory level courses as adjunct professors; but universities may be reluctant to send tenure track, Ph.D. holding faculty to teach high school dual enrollment sections. This brings up the point that through dual enrollment/dual credit programs and the credential requirements for academic transfer courses, these programs can help address the issue of teacher qualification.

A3. What ____ is saying, is uh, because I've worked again with the 2-year institutions that serve our area and they're, they come thru very well all the time. I mean whatever we asked of them, they come across. The university though, I wish we

could bring . . . over here, they haven't told us not to do that, no they will not send professors.

Again, the flexibility of the community college when compared to the university is evident in this response.

In the sake of time, the conversation was expanded to the role of other relationships and parties involved in solving the college readiness puzzle for this district.

*Economic forces hindering access to higher education*

Q. Let's keep talking about relationships, but I want to talk about relationships, are there other groups beyond the higher ed. partners? Are there other groups that you think might be important to increase the college readiness of your students? Other groups in your community or in the life's of the students? Are there other significant people, stake holders, whatever term you might like to . . . .

A1. Yeah, in our area and perhaps in many other areas, uhm, if not all, there is a certain section of the population that is low socio economic. And at least in my case for one of the contributing factors was always whether or not I was going to have enough money to continue attending the university? And I know that there are several lending institutions that have creatively thought of ways in which they could provide loans for students. I know that____. . . . has at least two, and one of them is that if you are a school district employee, or even a college student, they'll give you "no hassle computer loan". And now a days, a computer is so dire for someone attending college.

A2. And the other, other initiative that they have is that if you're a college student, to get a college loan, it's got a . . . intricate, I mean they have simplified things for

students. And so I think that if more institutions in this area, accommodate students, it will enable a lot more to complete their course work.

Surprised that financial lending policies emerged so quickly, I pressed the group more directly on the role of family and a surprising reference to gender based issues and college readiness emerged.

*Latino Families and gender issues*

Q. Yes, in your area or district. Do you think . . . what do you think about the connection between families and college readiness? Do you think it's significant? There is work to be done in that area?

A3. A lot.

A4. Parents should be aware of the requirements, also once the student goes into college, what is it that they will be required to do? It's best, not that they don't want to get involved, but perhaps they are misinformed . . . . all of the information . . . . that the children say OK, let's take this classes, . . . .

A5. No, how the different generations, whether you're first generation

A6. No, how the different generations, whether you're first generation Hispanic, second or third. And how your values either change or not and whether or not the aspirations are tied in or related to the different generations. But I was going to say in terms of what . . . we also in this are have to deal with cultural biases that some of our parents have. And in this geographical area, we still have a lot of parents thinking our young girls should not leave home to attend the university.

A. We, we have a lot of that and we've never been able to break that cultural barrier and it affects a lot of female students. And even for male students. . . . even for male students it holds true. We rather . . . we'd rather keep them here . . .

"Keeping them here" was something that it took the interviewer sometime to understand. Subsequently I learned that it means there is a geographic predilection reflected in the responses to my queries for families to want higher education for their children, but they want their children to stay close to home. This, in turn, may limit the higher education opportunities for the prospective college students.

The participants then shifted to issues facing Hispanic students in general and perceived low expectations among Latino parents, this despite a body of empirical evidence to the contrary (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Cabrera, 2008, forthcoming, for example).

A3. But that's a cultural bias and stigma that Hispanics have and is not helping . . . she needs to go off and explore other universities and other worlds . . .

A5. I saw more openness in my time and I was a child in the late 60's early 70's I'm talking about 300 miles north of us. So, uhm, I don't know, I see a . . . . there, I don't know how we can deal with that. I truly don't.

going into graduate. And I saw more openness and more willingness to allow males and females to . . . . at that time than I do today. And I'm not really sure if it's an influx in different type of parent, influences of different types of parents, I look back to the groups in front of me, before me in school for a 4-year of performing . . . . and most of our aspirations were to leave. Were to leave the

Valley at least. Many of us wanted to leave this state. Many of us did leave the state, uhm, and we were encouraged to . . . especially in my case. But now, I . . . when I was a teacher, I met several in my last few years I taught seniors, and primarily I had several males and females approach me and ask if I would meet with their parents, so that they could possibly get some kind of a push for UT Austin. I'm not talking about out of state.

Let me say this, about 5 or 6 years ago, _____ came out with a study. .for a . . Masters Program in higher education administration. The study was on the education pipeline and what's happening . . . . and how, there's comparison done of 100 whites, 100 Hispanics, and 100 blacks since they start kindergarten and then how many end up going to high school, how many graduate from high school, how many enter college, how many graduate from college, and I have the research and I use that when talking to parents. I went to about 6 or 7 elementary schools and the questions are always the same, "how many do you want them to graduate from high school?" Everybody raised their hands. And the second question, is "how many of you would like your kids to go to college?" And most of them, although some reluctant, go "why?". And I asked the next question, "how many of you have already talked to your kids about college?" And you'll see one or two hands go up. I thought . . . I tell them, look I know this is what you want to do, but your . . . in essence sending a message to your kids that college is not important. I know that is not what you're trying to do, but because you don't talk to them

tours, then you can ask certain problems, that probably the parents can twist around, but you have a schedule to say that the first week of this month or . . . . parents are welcomed to come by and show them the campus . . . .

This excerpt reveals a fundamental challenge facing a population overwhelming composed pf parents who did not attend college. Higher education is in short, a mystery to these parents.

At end of the meeting these participants continued to energetically focus on parental involvement. Observations that will have some interesting discontinuities when compared to the responses of parents from this district discussed in the next section of this chapter.

**Getting Parents on the high school campus/Latino parents and college knowledge**

These participants saw a clear need for parental involvement in the lives of students in the area of college readiness as is evidenced from the follow excerpts.

A. About parents, now that you mention parents, when I was an assistant principal at the high school, we were asking . . . . we had parents groups come to the high school just for training and so on . . . and one of the things that always did, give them a tour of our fine facility over at the high school. And you would be surprised how many parents didn't know we had welding shops and auto tech shops and building trades and cosmetology. "You do all of this here?"
A3. That's my goal . . . .our parents, many of our parents involved, many of our parents have so little contact, or have had so little contact with education and education facilities, "how do they talk to kids about college?" That what he

knows, absolutely nothing about college, it's tough to talk about it. Uhm, and again maybe that's our fault. Maybe that's an area that we need, we can do something, we need to become more involved, so that we improve parental involvement. . . .

**Importance of sharing college information with parents**

Communication and information sharing is also evident from this focus group.

A6.

You know, I just wanted to say also that we had a parent meeting in October, in one of our high schools already and we spoke about the dual enrollment program, college entrance exam, all those kinds of things, . . . . . they all want, and the kids maybe have never had anybody register them in high school, never had anybody go to college, and they want it because they are getting informed. These are the parents of course that go to meetings because it was in the evening and we had good involvement…

When asked to define college readiness this group did so in curricular terms and these definitions led directly to a line of questioning about the level of information being received by teachers and students regarding the gap between high school exit and college placement.

Though in some ways led there through questioning, this group also dealt extensively with socio-cultural and economic issues facing their district in the area of college readiness. This represents a departure from the superintendents discussed above

who seemed to take these factors for granted. For the observer and researcher it was as if as one moved organizationally closer to parents and students the Latino/Latina culture and the economic hardship and low educational experience of this population became more prominent. This group believed negative stereotypes of Latino parents not wanting higher education for the children, especially their daughters, may ring true in this district. One is unsure if these educators were reflecting the perception of a phenomenon of "not wanting" or "not knowing" on the part of the parents in the area of college aspirations and college readiness. I suspect the latter, as I shall show in the next section of this chapter based on qualitative data collected from parents, and from statistical evidence (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Cabrera, forthcoming 2008). A puzzle, therefore, exists as to why these public school administrators believed the stereotypes to have validity.

**Administrator Focus Group 3**

This group was composed of a high school principal, district level curricular leaders, a lead counselor, and central office planning administrators.

**Defining College Readiness**

When asked, this group defined college readiness in a more holistic, less technical way (test scores, curricular based, etc.). According to these group members, college readiness is a mindset and a set of behaviors for students as well as abilities at the more cognitive level

A1. Successful connection, whether it's getting a certificate, associates or bachelors. Something that has a meaningful connection that interests that student and also can advance their career. It's probably the foundation step,

the first step, uh, but it has to be a step that's extremely meaningful.

A5. And have to be able to pass the test. And be able to do the math, the reading and the writing . . . . necessary, right? That is readiness, I think that's one part of it, but the second part is to finish. The work ethic, the uh, integrity and everything else that comes along with . . . . being able to be a good student…

**Discussion of the university partner**

This group was then asked to discuss how higher education partners can play a role in enhancing both the cognitive and affective abilities of students to succeed in college. The responses echo other sentiments expressed by superintendents and members of the other administrator focus groups.

A1. I find that working through the universities is extremely a slow process. I find it higher ed. is very slow to try and you have . . . . it's been our biggest uh, it's our biggest drawback right now.

It's the lack of movement, it's almost at a tortoise pace . . . .

No one else is trying it!

The community college in this regard was characterized as being more responsive:

A2. I think it goes back to the . . . . it depends on the institution. It's like with one, it's quick. And it's a constant . . . . back and forth. Let's get it done. And others it's, "no it can't be done, no we need this". I mean we . . . . the liason, between them. Because if you have someone that's very , you get new people working with you, and you're back to square one.

*Communication across educational levels*

Like participants in other groups and among the superintendents, communication and information sharing between higher education institutions was seen as vital, but prone to gaps and breakdowns in communication.

A1. I think that communication is really happening from school district to the parent and the community. Not necessarily from the college to the family.

A3. There's still a big gap there. Unless we bring that individual ourselves down to bring their parents in, but we have to create that, needless so that they can come in. The college is not going to seek out the parents.

A3. It's not getting it out. And they haven't so far.

Q. So the college is not . . . . is going through the district to get information to parents . . . .

A2. It's really . . . the community is going to the university. The outreach could be much greater.

These responses show a desire for college/public school partnership in family based college readiness outreach. The last response reveals an underlying concern in the area of university partners and the preparation of teachers at the graduate level. The logic being expressed here is those public school teachers possessing content specific (as opposed to mid-management the M Ed.) MA/MS degrees not only become more knowledgeable in their field of teaching, they also become eligible to teach dual enrollment/dual credit sections. These better qualified teachers thusly ease administrative and logistical burdens on the both the district and the higher education partner, while at the same time enhancing the reputation of the district and improving teacher quality.

**Knowledge of college readiness among faculty and staff**

Due to factors having to do with the small size of the district and innovations the district is undertaking in the area of college readiness, these respondents characterized their district as having a high level of understanding the curricular and technical aspects of college readiness.

Q. If I were to and your district may be unique because the _____ (removed for identification purposes) but if I were to take a random high school teacher, or middle school teacher, and asked them about college readiness, do you think they would have good information about what the requirements were of the Texas Success Initiative. Would they understand or would that be like . . . . something the counselors and maybe the principals might know, but not teachers?

A4. I would think they would have a fairly descent understanding of it. Cause we push it all the time. Let me give you an example, we talked about the new financial aid law, was it 150 hours of financial aid?

A4. If you failed a course after the 3rd time you get penalized with a couple of tuition clause.

A4. We talked a about . . . . and this is it probably comes out because, if you have a regular university that say has 78% failure in college algebra, well you can't go back and say it's a high school issue. Because you already had a student take a remedial math course 10 times at the university. And so our teachers know that we can't allow our kids to fall into a trap of taking remedial or medium, when they has no benefit on your degree plan.

This last response reflects a good understanding of why students end up in developmental education courses at the post-secondary level. The principal emphasizes working at the secondary level to help students avoid ending up in developmental courses.

**Disconnect between higher education/public education and curricular alignment**

Following the line of reasoning expressed above, the participants were asked what the district and their higher education partners could specifically do to improve students' college readiness and avoid the need for students to enter into remedial education at the post-secondary level.

> A4. So we have to make sure that our preparations when our kids get out, making a transition from high school right into college course. But if you're handling that high failure rate, and you have a high level rate in your introductory chemistry and biology courses, well there is a disconnect between high school and college or the universities
>
> And everybody else says . . . . TAKS, teach the TAKS, teach the TAKS is the same. While college professors are saying we are not worrying about TAKS, we want to know can they chemically break down photosynthesis. Well that's where the kind of tests we made, that's what we're trying to accomplish when we do this curriculum alignment with university courses. We get high school and college professors together.
>
> Q. So you need to see more . . . . curricular alignment?

A4. There has to be.

A1. They (college faculty) have no idea what the standards (TEKS) are for . . .

Q. That's right.

A3. They just know what to expect for students to be able to do with them at the post-secondary level.

A2. We even teach Civil War, if you're a history professor and you can teach it for 6 weeks, but a high school teacher can't, because they are driven by a timeline by the state. So we need the Coordinating Board along with TEA just to get them to say, " just a minute". Probably it has to start there and . . . .then to the universities.

This last response is stating that the TAKS assessment (high school exit exam), based on curricular standards (TEKS) is not allowing high school faculty the time to provide the depth of information that they believe will be required of students in general education, introductory credit-bearing courses at the post-secondary level.

***Defining Success for College Readiness Initiatives***

In the interests of the time demands on these professionals I was forced to conclude this focus group meeting with a question pertaining to what these individuals would consider a successful college readiness set of college readiness initiatives. This group defined success, as student success and returned to holistic themes iterated at the beginning of the meeting.

A1. I would think success is that when you see kids go into college and they can take course and they pass them. And when you have kids at our high school that

are graduating with college hours that's means they're ready, they're in. That's what I see as success.

A4. I think it goes back to, I mean what everybody is saying is we're really doing is two fold, one is that we are preparing the students academically

Because what you need to understand now a lot of our students are first generation high school graduates, first generation going to college and eventually being college graduates. So we're dealing with different issues, we're dealing with the belief that these kids can graduate from high school, can graduate from college. And guess what, they can do it. We want it to become an automatic, where the kids are going to believe that, hey it's an expectation.

These responses were indicative of a high level of understanding of the different dimensions of college readiness necessary for students to possess to increase the likelihood of success at the college level. More so than other groups, these group members saw the challenge of first-generation college goers as being not limited to the cognitive, academic domain. Though knowledge and skills are certainly necessary, they were not seen as completely sufficient for this population of students. These educators saw the self-esteem of their students and the ability of these students to see themselves as potential college goers as a key element in their future success. These educators said that when no one in their family may have ever attained a college degree of any type, the ability of these students to believe in themselves cannot be over emphasized.

## OVERARCHING THEMES- ADMINISTRATIVE FOCUS GROUPS

Four interrelated themes emerged from the administrative focus groups within the three districts:

1. Basic defintions of college readiness provided by these sets of participants have two dimensions. First, college readiness involves increasing the rigor and aligning the curriuculum of secondary education with the postsecondary level. Second, enhancing certain behavioral and affective characteristics among potential college students is necessary to increase the liklihood of college success for these students. This second aspect of college readiness is particularly acute for first-generation college-goers. It should be noted that these educators did not necessarily define college readiness, rather they chose to emphasize different means as to how high school students might attain a state of college readiness.
2. Related to the more holistic means of obtaining college readiness mentioned above, better communication and information sharing between institutions of higher education and the public schools is required. Information sharing is also vital to the family based outreach theme that I will discuss below. As I have noted on page 22 of this chapter, outreach activities of various types are forms of communication that provide information about the contextual aspects of higher education. Dissemination of the technical requirements of college placement and the misalignment between high school exit and college placement is another vital piece of information that needs to permeate all levels of the high school and community. Finally, curricular alignment is a

form of in-depth professional communication among faculty wherin the expectations of higher education are compared to the realities of the public education classroom.

3. Family involvement is a vital componant for enhancing college readiness. Latino students, many of whom are the first in their families to consider attending college, may not possess the kind of social and educational capital taken for granted in other populations. The public school administrators I talked to said they wanted more extensive family based outreach in close alliance with their higher education partners.
4. These educators had positive perceptions of the community college as a flexible and willing partner in their college readiness efforts. This was shown through numerous references to dual enrollment/dual credit course offerings and a physical presence of outreach specialists from the community college on their high school campuses. At the same time the public four-year regional comprehensive university in this region was portrayed as relatively inflexible, incommunicative, and slow moving in providing the kind of information and services needed to enhance the college readiness of these students.

One noteworthy point of departure should be noted among these groups. Focus Group 2 spent some time discussing the socio-cultural aspects of the Latino/a population and what some have termed an "educational culture of low expectations" (see Garcia, 2001 for example). Despite countervailing empirical evidence that I will present later in the this chapter and in Chapter 5, this group indicated the phenomena of low expectations exists, and saw more extensive family based outreach as a way to combat it. As I have

stated on page 31 of this chapter, one was left unsure, based on the information from these groups, if this is a phenomena of "not wanting" a college education for their children or "not knowing" how to help their children get the education. Evidence I will present below will indicate it is a matter of "not knowing," thus requiring more extensive, community based college readiness outreach efforts for these families.

**Parental Focus Groups (PFG)**

The parental focus groups were composed of parental volunteers in the Abriendo Puertas Parental Communication Initiative. Each volunteer group corresponded to the three districts studied to gather data for this project. The Abriendo Puertas (Opening Doors) Initiative was established in 2003 by the Texas A&M University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences to provide a parental support system to assist Latino/a students in the Rio Grande Valley region of South Texas in high school completion and college graduation. [20] The goals of the initiative are to support parents in their children's college access and participation efforts. Abriendo Puertas is a grass-roots program that as of 2007 has trained 500 volunteers who have in turn provided educational outreach to approximately 8000 families in this region. Abriendo Puertas represents what Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) have termed "bottom up," parent centered involvement in public education. The "outreach empowerment" model of Abriendo Puertas is based on a model developed by the World Health Organization to establish society-wide progress on social and economic development issues. Over 98 percent of Abriendo Puertas volunteers are women who lack any higher education and who live the same neighborhoods and

whose children attend the same schools as the families they work with. The outreach conducted uses a bilingual, accessible, culturally relevant curriculum and is presented in locations convenient to population being served; often in the home.

After meeting with Drs. Ida Acuna-Garza, and Hector Adalpe (Director and Associate Director, Abriendo Puertas Initiative, respectively), it occurred to me that by conducting focus groups with the initiative's volunteers in the same three school districts where the first two sets of information was gathered, I could in some way begin the hear the voices of not just the volunteers but also of the parents they encounter. In effect, the unique, grass-roots nature of Abriendo Puertas gave me a window on the larger community of families and parents in this region and their perceptions of college readiness and the issues that surround this topic.

I began each parental focus group with questions to explore the value these parents placed on higher education and then explored the depth of their knowledge about higher education. Secondly, I was concerned about the level of parental participation and any percieved barriers to this participation. The parental focus groups provided a greater depth of background to this study and a useful means of comparison to the information conveyed by the educational professionals in the first two sets of data gathering activities for this study. With the exception of two male attendees in PFG 2, all participants in these focus groups were women.

### *Parental Focus Group One (PFG One)*

These parents understood well the value of higher education.

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[20] This background information on the Abriendo Puertas initiative was obtained from an informational

A1. “it is very hard for you to get a job without a college education”

A3. “In order to succeed in life, I mean, you have to go to college.”

These parents also reported they had a good understanding of the difference between the community college and the four-year university.

Johnson: Do the parents they encounter know the difference between the community college and the university?

14 Yes.

15 RESPONDER: Uh-huh, they do. They know

16 about this one so well (South Texas College).

17 RESPONDER: Yeah.

18 RESPONDER: I had a speaker come over.

19 RESPONDER: Community College, two years

20 only preparation, two years. College, four years a

21 minimum.

22 (Through the interpreter) They had a

23 meeting where they actually covered the -- the

24 difference, between like a community college which is

25 mainly two years, and then the university, four more years.

### *The deleterious effects of poverty*

But when asked about the challenges faced by the parents they encounter in their outreach efforts socio-cultural and economic concerns emerged.

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report and planning document provided the author by Dr. Hector Aldalpe, Associate Director, Abriendo Puertas, Edinburg, TX

A5 .Low income families…like they think their child is not going to be able to have …to attend college. It's like they don't have –even motivate their kids to go to college, or maybe not finish high school…"

A7.Another thing is cultural. The Hispanic, you know way of thinking, the machismo. The part where, you just, the parents don't get involved. You know they, their belief systems are just, you know they're misformed."

A2. And it's something of a myth that's out there…but it seems to be some kind of a myth that if you don't have money, if, you know, that if you don't have money college isn't for you."

Economic and financial concerns pertaining to the costs of higher education, often to the point of stigmatization, play a significant role for the parents encountered by these women. (Numbers on the left are the line numbers from the transcript. Each break represents a different respondent).

16 " I have parents that come to
17 me. I've always helped them with _____
18 She's a financial coordinator. And they
19 come to me and they tell me, "_____, no, no;
20 thanks, but no, no. They're not going to go to
21 college. We're very poor. We don't have money for
22 the bills. They're going to go work as soon as they
23 turn 17, 18. We're going to get them out of school
24 because they have to work and help us."

25 “And I've got parents that I've visited

1 very often, and I've talked to them, and I've got so

2 many parents that their kids are at home -- the girls.

3 They're cleaning houses. The boys are in the fields,

4 like right now they have the fruit here, and they're

5 out there picking oranges and vegetables –

4 and on breaking fears or,

5 you know, shedding fears and being able to bring out

6 the potential within the person –

8 And having them understand

9 that, you know, your parents -- having them understand

10 that just because you (the children) were told this, doesn't mean

11 that that's what it is, you know, and breaking that

12 kind of a barrier.

And I tell them, "You can get help. They'll pay for the

9 college," and all this, and I have parents who say,

10 "No, we're poor. They have to stay home and work."

11 But it's a form of thinking

12 that they feel that they're not worthy, you know, and

13 -- and they instill those fears into their children.

14 So it's more so that it's just -- it's like a chain

15 that just hasn't been broken –

The respondent below indicates poverty instills fear in these parents and low self-esteem in their children.

" that a child, you know,
hasn't been told, you know, you can, you know. And
they -- they're going to go more -- it's been shown
that they're going to do what the parents do or what
the parents say, and they really take those fears and
they're instilled in them to where even though they're
being told that the opportunities are there, you know,
that is still there.
So I don't know if it would be very
helpful to kind of have a class within the curriculum
at school on self esteem"

Like the administrators interviewed prior to them, these parents see the value in the information gained from outreach activities.

I think that here in South
Texas a lot of it has to do with so many parents being
Spanish speakers, that they are timid to go and walk
into the school and find out what's going on with
their child, what's out there to help them maybe even
better their grades, what is available for them, what
is it that they need to do as parents to help them try
to succeed, finish high school and continue their

education.

Anyway, and the counselor was there and the financial aid lady was there. And, believe me, there was migrant, TR parents, there was parents, Special Ed parents, you know, and they explained, they talked; and it was about a two-hour meeting.

When we finished that meeting, most of the parents -- I could say all of them -- got up, wrote their information, and talked to _____ _____, and they were very excited. You know, they -- they -- they lacked learning. You know, I explained to them what I know, what, you know, but they're afraid.

***Gender Bias in Going to College***

Based on the responses from administrative focus group two regarding gender bias and discouragement of females from attending college, I explored this theme with this group of parents. These parents indicated that a geographic gender bias (in where their daughters were encouraged to attend college) may exist past. One participant, however, admitted she was "ignorant" to have expressed this view to her daughter and that she did not believe this to be true in the present.

I had a parent say -- she raised her hand and she said in Spanish, "Well, my Comadre's

daughter..." -- Comadre in English, I don't know what it is -- Comadre.

RESPONDER: Comrade -- comrade.

THE INTERPRETER: Friend.

RESPONDER: "...her daughter went to Kingsville College, and she got pregnant over there. I don't want that to happen to my daughter."

The machismo there in these Latin Mexicanos, they think that if you're -- well, I'll be honest with you. My son went to St. Edward's University. He got a scholarship. My girls wanted to go to U.T. and I said no.

I was at that time I was ignorant. I said, "No, Helen and Rosa, you can't go over there because I don't want to be afraid myself." I was afraid to send those girls out there -- to live by themselves, going out on the streets, and not me knowing. I kept them at Pan American University, and they graduated from there.

It was my son that graduated when he was 16. He jumped from sophomore to senior, very smart. He's the one I got rid of -- not got rid of. He is

the one that I drove in the pickup with furniture and everything over there, and said, "And you're staying here, and you're not going to work. You're going to set your mind on education, and then when you get back, we'll see what happens."

He stayed over there. Of course I go visit him -- but he's the one I sent away, not the girls. Now I think -- hey, I used to think like that 20, 30 years ago but I'm not sure anymore.

These mothers indicated that they wanted a college education for their daughters but that they wanted them to live at home (or stay closer to home) while attending college. However, as the respondent above indicates, she is "not sure anymore" about this belief.

***Responsibility for Education and Immigration Status***

Building on themes of the effects of poverty (discussed above) and a research literature that explores a phenomena among Latino families who believe education should be the exclusive responsibility of educational institutions (Rendon, 2002 for example), I asked a set of questions about who these parents viewed as being responsible for building college readiness among high school students in this region. During the course of this discussion a theme pertaining to the immigration status of parents emerged.

Q. Do you think that parents see that they are involved in their child's education, that it's not

14 just the responsibility of the school?

15 RESPONDER: Yes.

16 RESPONDER: I have a whole bunch of them.

17 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: So you think

18 parents do understand that?

19 RESPONDER: I don't think they -- they

20 totally understand it --

21 RESPONDER: No.

22 RESPONDER: -- not all of them -- not all

23 of them.

24 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Ma'am, what do you

25 think?

1 RESPONDER: Not all of them, huh-uh.

2 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Not all of them?

3 RESPONDER: Not all of them.

4 RESPONDER: I think only there's a small

5 percentage that understand.

*Immigration Status emerges as a barrier to getting involved*

These parents then mentioned that the immigration status may be a barrier to greater parental involvement in the area of college readiness.

5 Through the interpreter)

She's just saying that sometimes the parents, they don't want to get involved, but they -- she usually tells them to get more –

Responder: She's saying that parents, since they're afraid of getting close to school because of their legal situation.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Oh. Immigration status?

RESPONDER: Yes.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Sometimes like because the -- the kids are U.S. citizens, but the parents are --

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Are not?

RESPONDER: -- illegal aliens, they are afraid of getting close -- like getting involved in the school more. Let's see, we have 2,600 students at school where I work, _____ High School. Forty -- maybe more -- I could say more, but I don't want to sound like that -- 45 percent are illegal.

The kids were born in Mexico. The Mama, the Papa were born in Mexico. They crossed the river.

I'm sure you heard about that. And they got to school. We do not deny education. We do not ask, "Did you cross the river?" I know because when I have the meetings, they tell me how much they've suffered.

RESPONDER: So most of those parents are afraid, and those students say, "Well, I don't have a Social Security. I don't have papers. How can I go to UT Austin? How can I go to college out of here? There is no papers."

But now they're saying they can go. They get a permit, and they get educated. And this is what the parents don't understand.

They're afraid to let go.

This theme of parents being intimidated by actually going to the public school to meet with teachers and counselors about their children would continue to emerge in this and a subsequent parental focus group. The fact that these parents stated that there was a disconnection in communication between parents and the public schools was an observation that should be noted.

But it is very hard to get parents to come in, and when you're going to talk to them about their child's education and stuff. And it is very sad to see that parents aren't really making that their priority.

And meetings are in the evenings, sometimes in the morning. You know, you try to accommodate everybody's schedule, but you still don't have the turnout. So there is a big concern when it comes to, you know, are the parents informed enough as to what's going on in the school? And there's a disconnection with the communication between parents and the schools. And I -- I think the number is low also.

At this point a parent states that her most effective outreach takes place in the home, not at the school.

That's why I go one-to-one to the parents. I go visit them at their homes. And actually I'm there to 7:30, 8:00 o'clock at night. And they're like -- they have concerns too, you know, but they're working. That's why they don't attend meetings.

That's what I find out. That's when they're like, they're really grateful that I'm there and giving them all the information that they're going to use. And that's why I'm telling them like, "Okay, you can go to school, visit your child. You can be there with them."

I tell them, "You can be there with them at least once a week."

And they go, "Can I do that?"

I tell them, "Yes, you can; yes, you can. You have all the right to be there with your child if you want to."

And they tell me, "Okay, you know what? I'm going to go visit my -- my next week I have a day off. I'll go visit my child and be there with him all day."

And I tell -- and that's -- you know I do, basically, a lot of information, and they like it.

I think most of the parents it's because they work and they don't have enough information. They can't attend meetings --

As the conversation progressed I explored a comment regarding the communication disconnect between the parents and the schools.

Johnson: I'd like to go back to what you said about a disconnect?

RESPONDER: A very -- a disconnection.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: -- between the school and the parents. Could you translate that?

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) What she said, that the school in_____, they send a lot of information. She has two kids in _____, and they get a lot of information.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. What about where there is the disconnect, what do you think the reason, the cause, or what might -- what might help it get better?

Increased school security emerges as yet another intimidation factor for the parents contacted by the parental trainers who composed this focus group. One parent described it like “walking into an airport.”

RESPONDER: Well, there has been -- there has been, like I said, you know, a lot of this mythical stuff. A lot of parents are afraid to go to the schools because the schools themselves have kind of shut the doors on them.

When there's a parent, right now you have to go through a whole security basis just to come into the school to get a message to your son or daughter.

You have to -- you have to leave your driver's license. They'll give you a visitor pass, and they'll send you to who you need to talk to and so forth.

And so it's kind of like walking into an airport now, you know, you have to pass through security and stuff. And because of all of that, that might be just a small percentage of that.

But a lot of parents do feel that, you know, my son is at school. He's the school's responsibility, not mine at that point in time.

So the parents are really not stepping up to the responsibility of, you know, this is my child, I'm responsible 24/7 wherever he's at.

Still more fundamental reasons having to do with work and transportation were put forward to explain the lack of parental involvement in building college readiness.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: What kind of reasons do parents give for not participating?

RESPONDER: What kind of reasons?

RESPONDER: Working.

RESPONDER: "We're working."

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Working?

RESPONDER: "There's not enough time." They're working. They have other children at home.

RESPONDER: Yeah.

RESPONDER: They have, you know, there is

always -- but it's mostly the transportation and the working.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Transportation and work?

RESPONDER: Transportation, that's the main one.

As the parents discussed barriers for participation I sought to explore the gender issues raised earlier and their potential as a barrier to college readiness in a more specific way.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. And finally, do the parents -- and we've touched on this -- do the parents see their daughters going to college as well as their sons? Or do you think there's a difference there between daughters and sons going to college?

RESPONDER: I don't think there is, especially nowadays. I think a lot of the girls in school, just like the boys, you know, they -- they know that the school is out there for them after high school. It's up to them to say, "You know what, Mom? I'm going to go."

I think that if they take that to the parents, I believe -- well, I choose to believe that the parents are going to say, "Well, okay, then, you

know, what can we do?"

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: For the daughter.

RESPONDER: For the daughter, yes.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Well, in fact, it's a real problem. We're not getting enough young men going to college nowadays.

But you think -- so you think it's getting better. You touched on how people were afraid to send their daughters, but you think it's getting better?

RESPONDER: Yes.

RESPONDER: Oh, yes, definitely.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Supposedly now it's the same. It's the same thing.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: It's the same for sons and daughters?

RESPONDER: Yes.

These responses indicate that these parents now equally encouraged sons and daughters to attend college and that they knew there were more females enrolled in college than males. However, given their responses when asked about other parents they encounter, older gender based biases still were said to exist.

***Emergent Themes for PFG One***

Three fundamental themes emerged from the discussion with this focus group.

1. The effects of poverty and immigration status impose barriers to parental participation in college readiness outreach. Parents who may have not graduated from high school and who are undocumented residents of the United States are intimidated and even stigmatized from involvement with educational institutions. Some of these parents reported that among the parents the work with see education as the responsibility of educators and not something that requires a high level of parental involvement. This is a phenomenon that is well researched within the literature on Latinos and education (see Rendon, 2002, for example). Similarly, these parents may not know about financial aid opportunities available to their children and may view higher education as cost prohibitive. These parents face the responsibilities of long working days and limitations on transportation which is particularly acute in a large geographic area like the Rio Grande Valley.
2. The parental trainers report that parents are knowledgeable about some aspects of higher education, like the difference between the community college and the four-year university, but given observation one, they do not know all of the details about how to obtain higher education for their children. This provides more evidence to support "not knowing" about higher education versus "not wanting" higher education for their

children when it comes to Latino families and their relationship to, and their perceptions of higher education.

3. Gender bias was evident, but it was more nuanced than the assertion that these families do not want higher education for their daughters. The parental trainers reported for both themselves and the parents that they work with, that the concern is more about where their daughters attend college versus whether or not their daughters go to college. These parents indicated they want their daughters to stay close to home, but that they realize the value of higher education for all of their children.

In the two sections that follow I will report on the parental focus groups conducted corresponding to district two and district three. I will note similarities and differences in the themes that emerged from these activities and provide a final summation of all the themes that emerged from the three sets of data gathering activities.

***Parental Focus Group Two***

This focus group activity was unique in that it took place in the home of one of the Abriendo Puertas trainers and that it included two male participants. Like PFG One, I began this activity by asking the parents about the relative value they placed on higher education. These parents described a high level of importance and a clear level of understanding of higher education and economic pragmatism for their children.

8 Okay. How important do the parents here see a college education
10 for their children? Very important? Medium?

RESPONDER: Very important.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Very important?

RESPONDER: Very important.

Facilitator JOHNSON: Very important.

RESPONDER: Very, very important.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Could one or two of you tell me why -- why you think a college education is so important?

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Now all the jobs are -- are required that you have some type of education. So, you know, you have to make a living, you need to.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) That a better life for them, not so they won't have to do such hard work in regards to more like manual labor. Education will provide them an easier life. Education, hopefully, will give them a chance to postpone some of the other things like marriage and, you know, some of the things that traditionally were more important first -- getting an education will start a career.

This latter response is interesting in that shows a view of college and career that breaks with a more traditional view of marriage and family beginning for young people immediately after high school.

Noticing the male participants, I queried the group about the participation of fathers and the response harkened back to a response with PFG One regarding the necessities of work for these families.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. I would like a -- this is a question that is not on the list, but we have two men present, and I think that is great. Do -- do you find that there are a lot of fathers and husbands involved in this kind of activity or not so many?

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) They have to work.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Fathers primarily work, and they don't have the opportunity to participate, so usually the mothers are the ones who have to do this.

***Poverty and Financial Aid***

Like PFG One, the effects of poverty and the need for sound information about financial aid opportunities for the parents that these parental trainers quickly emerged as a barrier in this community.

24 Facilitator: (Through the interpreter)

25 What they see as the biggest problem is that the parents they work with face?—

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter)

1 biggest problem is financial problems, financial aid,
2 informing themselves about financial aid and seeing
3 that we, you know, trying to find out who -- we're
4 trying to find opportunities for our children --
5 opportunities they can to assist to make up a
6 financial assistance is the biggest -- is always the
7 biggest concern they have.

These parents reported the exigencies of work and transportation were hindrances to more traditional forms of college readiness outreach. The most specific topic that these parents said that they encounter with other parents concern finances and the complexities of the financial aid process.

25 Facilitator Johnson: Do parents ever give you reasons for not participating?

2 RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) For
3 me, an example is my husband works, so he can't go,
4 and that's the example of a lot of people who have to
5 work. You have to make a choice, do I go to school or
6 do I go do this at the school or do I go to work.
7 And, of course, transportation is also a problem -- no
8 transportation, no vehicle, you know, you can't

attend.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. What is the best way that you found to give information to other parents?

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Talking parent to parent. You know, I ran into a person at the -- at the store, explained -- you know, and I explained to them -- they were explaining to me the problems that they were having, and I explained to them that there's programs out there like financial aid. There is loans that you can get, that six months after you get the -- you finish school, you can start paying back the loans. And, you know, it makes -- it makes her feel good that, you know, we can provide this type of help because parents don't have this information. And that is their biggest worry, is how are they going to pay for the -- how are parents going to pay for the school.

RESPONDER: I want to say something also.

(Through the interpreter) That they've seen a lot of parents -- a lot of parents struggle with filling out the financial aid form. They have to pay, you know, she has seen people that have had to

pay other people to fill out the financial aid form. That's some training that should be offered already that Abriendo Puertas right now is -- we're currently doing to educate the parents and educate their student, their kids that, you know, the program can actually be done, like her son, has done it on the computer. He did it on the computer.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Somebody came one time and they told him that they were going to give him this, you know, like a scholarship, and the scholarship, they had to pay $900 for the scholarship. And the scholarship, it wasn't a scholarship; it was financial aid. You know, so they got cheated out of $900.

The last two responses are noteworthy. Not only are there difficulties encountered by the parents the trainers work with in filling out complicated financial aid forms, but there may also be predatory and perhaps criminal activities being carried out against them. Again, these would seem to be vulnerabilities that are particularly acute in a population of high poverty and a Spanish speaking population in an English speaking world of federal financial aid.

***Communication and Information Sharing with Other Parents***

Like PFG One, these parents displayed a high level of knowledge about college readiness, only in this group it was demonstrated through a discussion of high school exit and college placement examinations.

RESPONDER: I'm going to answer that question too. I think that.... (Through the interpreter) I think about eighth grade, you know, they should have a -- I think they should have a program in eighth grade starting so they can get information regarding the SAT, the PSAT, the THEA, the credits that are offered, the credits that are required, you know, informing the students and the parents, this is what your children need to finish school and to get into college. Right now the parents don't have that training, don't have that knowledge to pass on to their children. We need to start at a younger age, in eighth grade, to get those programs rolling so by the time they get to high school, they're prepared and they're ready. They know what they're going to face.

This response shows a high level of understanding and sophistication of the college readiness issue and the need for greater involvement at the middle school level.

Okay, when you meet with the other parents, do you ever tell stories of

your own children's experiences, or do you ever have your own children who are in college come and talk to other parents?

(This question was based on Auerbach (2004) who noted that the telling of personal stories was the most effective means of parental outreach for college readiness with the Latino community). One should notice within the responses a continued focus on financial aid and the economic aspects of higher education.

RESPONDER: Yes.

RESPONDER: Sometimes.

RESPONDER: We like to share stories of -- we do like to share our stories, because our stories help pass out information. My kids essentially went through school through loans. They got loans knowing that when they graduated and get a professional job, that they would be able to afford to pay those loans back. If it wasn't for loans, they probably wouldn't have been able to go to school.

And those stories, you know, they pass on to other -- we pass on to other parents to let them know that there is, you know, obviously, ways to -- to get their education. And there was a conference that they attended that her sons actually flew down, one from Houston, one from Fort Worth, to attend this

5 conference and to share these stories with parents in
6 the program.

***Public Schools May Be Barriers***

As I continued to probe the group about obstacles they face in reaching other parents in the area of college readiness outreach a surprising obstacle emerged; the public schools themselves.

RESPONDER: But if the parents are not
14 informed on how to get, you know, help, how are they
15 going to be notified or --
16 RESPONDER: Yeah, let me answer that --
17 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: So you think
18 information is needed.
19 RESPONDER: Yes.
20 RESPONDER: Yes.
21 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. Information
22 is needed.
23 RESPONDER: And we have been trying with
24 Abriendo Puertas to pass this information. But what
25 we're saying right now that we were free to go to
schools and go give this information, and that's not
2 happening anymore because we're not going into the
3 schools, and we're volunteers -- parents, volunteers

learning to bring back to the community; and they're closing the doors to us. So we are wanting now for these programs to come back and inform the people.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: When you say "closing the doors," who is closing the doors?

RESPONDER: Principals.

RESPONDER: Principals.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Principals? In the high schools?

RESPONDER: Yes.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: And middle schools?

RESPONDER: Well, middle schools -- well, they're more active right now than I am so she knows more.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Like right now at _____ Elementary, Middle School, as soon as you'd walk in, there is a desk, and they have chairs for you to sit so you can't pass. They're kind of like the gatekeeper.

RESPONDER: And that was not in before.

THE INTERPRETER: It wasn't there before.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) I can see why. I can see why they have, you know,

stricter security measures because of all the incidents that have occurred like some of the student shootings massacres that have happened recently. So there is an understanding of why there is a little bit more, you know, restrictions of access. But at the same time, I mean, we're not, you know, we're parents, don't have any malintent , but it's hard to get passed that.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) And that's what we have, technology; I mean, with technology we can put a camera out from the door and like we can see who is coming in and who's coming out, and instead of taking these drastic measures where you're keeping the parents out.

The surprise for me was that increased school security may intimidate parents, already vulnerable through poverty and perhaps immigration status, from becoming involved in activities at the school.

### *Communication and a High Level of Knowledge About College Readiness*

Though they were not asked specifically about it, this particular group of Abriendo Puertas trainers understood the connection between college readiness and developmental studies/remediation at the community college level. These responses, like

those of the superintendents and the district administrators show the need for more extensive communication and information sharing about college readiness.

RESPONDER: We were a group....

(Through the interpreter) Right now we are a group of 15, you know, we are not as active as we used to -- as we were, but we are that we have developed leaders. And the leaders we're still working to pass -- pass the word and to be involved, you know, whether to be training or to this informal story telling like you said.

And, essentially, we want to find out why is it that our students, our children in our community are not ready to go to college. Why is it that when they go to STC they have to take remedial courses, you know? Where are we failing?

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: And when you say "where are we failing," do you mean -- do you mean parents or schools or both?

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) To me, it's -- to me it's that the parents are not being informed. The parents are not being informed whether

their children are taking -- our children are taking advanced classes, regular classes. You know, we're not getting information about what our kids are doing in school.

At this point I sought to further explore the kinds of institutional barriers that these parents believe exist in the area college readiness outreach

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: When you -- are there places that you think are better to meet with parents? Would it be better to meet in a home, or would it be better to meet at the school, or at a church, or a community center, or somewhere like that?

RESPONDER: Personally, at home.

THE INTERPRETER: At home?

RESPONDER: Community meetings would be wonderful. They would be in your community. You don't have to go all the way to_____. You don't have to go all the way to the other end of the -- our District is _____miles, square miles.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: So it's better to be in a home or somewhere in the community --

RESPONDER: The local community.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: -- a church, a community center?

RESPONDER: We worked in the communities before.

RESPONDER: I think the parents would feel much more comfortable in the community or at the school if they felt welcomed and received at the school and comfortable.

Since they're not and since we don't feel that way, we would much rather do it at our homes where we feel more comfortable and where, you know, where we can -- we feel that we're welcome, obviously.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. Thank you.

Again, the latter response states unequivocally that these parents and those they work with are not “comfortable” in their local public schools.

***Gender Issues***

I was able to touch briefly on gender issues with this group and found that these parents saw higher education as a value for both their sons and daughters. This was a departure from the administrators in this district who perceived traditional views towards Latinas and college attendance as an issue in this community.

Facilitator Johnson: Do these parents see their sons and daughters both going to college?

RESPONDER: (Through interpreter) What I see is that it's going to be both male and female for

21 the boys and girls because they both need the
22 opportunity. The days that the woman was maintained
23 by the man are over, so --
24 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Did you hear that,
25 guys?
1 RESPONDER: -- you have to send your
2 girls to college.
3 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Anything, I mean,
4 would you say, Ma'am, that daughters and sons go to
5 college?
6 RESPONDER: Yes, uh-huh.
7 FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Yes?
8 RESPONDER: Even as parents, we need to
9 go back to school and teach our children that it's
10 never too late, you need to go.

***Hearing the Voices of Parents in this Community***

As this focus group concluded, these parents voiced more concerns about the lack of information and what can be characterized as a lack of access to their school district to carry out their tasks of building college readiness in this community.

2 RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter)
3 What we see is that we, you know, we want results. We
4 want results of what's happening. We feel that, you

know, sometimes we have our voice, but it's not being heard. It's not being heard, and we're not getting the feedback that we want. We want, you know, to start seeing some results and getting answers for the questions that we have. And so that's a part of it. It's not that we don't want -- we want more information, and we're not always getting it -- not getting the information that we're asking for. So that's --

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) And like right now I feel that a big problem is that we have a lot of students, like 500 students to one counselor. So the counselors can't really do their job because the semester can go by. By the time that a student sees a counselor, the semester is already over, and they can be, you know, either in the wrong class or not getting -- not in the right class, and will never get the advising that they need.

FACILITATOR JOHNSON: Okay. I think we're --

RESPONDER: Can I say something? I just want to say....

(Through the interpreter) The program of

Abriendo Puertas has given us the opportunity to, you know, educate and pass on this information that we've learned. A lot of parents, you know, now know that they can call us to get this information that they need and to answer the questions that nobody seems to want to answer or can't answer correctly.

So this program has given the opportunity to -- to pass their message to the community, you know, and pass information that's not being passed by the School District.

RESPONDER: (Through the interpreter) Right now there's a Gear Up Program at the _____ High School, and the principal really holds up a lot of the activities and opportunities. Everything has got to go through the principal, and this program, you know, gives opportunity to travel to do a lot of different activities, and for some reason the principal isn't letting it happen, you know. So those are the type of obstacles that they face that, you know --

The statement about the "principal holding up activities" reiterated the earlier frustrations voiced by these parents about relationships within this district. These parents see the

Abriendo Puertas program as a means to provide information about college readiness that they do not see as forthcoming from the school district.

### *Emergent Themes for PFG Two*

Three fundamental themes emerged from PFG Two.

1. The parental leaders of this group placed a high value on higher education in the lives of their children and in the community they serve. These parents showed a high degree of economic pragmatism in their responses to these lines of questioning; acknowledging that higher education was an investment in the future lives of their children.
2. The effects of poverty were apparent in the responses to questions pertaining to obstacles and challenges, but some of these effects were different than those discussed in PFG One. The participants in both groups saw the need for greater information about financial aid for students from a community gripped by poverty. In PFG Two, however, the vulnerability caused by poverty manifested itself in intimidation rather than stigmatization. These parents relayed that they had trouble working with the public schools and that the parents they encountered were in many ways disconnected from their children's schools by things ranging from increased campus security to aloof high school principals.
3. Participants in PFG 2 exhibited a high degree of knowledge about higher education in areas like the link between the lack of college readiness and the high levels of remediation required in higher education, but the disconnect with public education exacerbated communication gaps about how to solve the problem. Like

the superintendents and administrators interviewed for this project, these parents are asking for more extensive communication and information sharing about college readiness from both public and higher education.

### *Parental Focus Group Three (PFG Three)*

The gathering of information from this group was more problematic than the data gathered from PBG 1 and 2 for two reasons. Due to scheduling conflicts and repeated cancellations, the meeting with this group took place prior to the other two groups. While I used the same set of foundational questions as a guide, I was unsure in this initial meeting what particular topics and issues I should explore within the group. Secondly, because of translation issues, this group was less focused and I and the translator had trouble getting the participants to not talk all at the same time and allow the translator to catch up. This group was also unclear as to whether I was asking them questions as parents of children in this district or about the parents they work with in their outreach efforts.

### *Positive Relations with the School District*

Given these limitations, this group when compared to PFG Two showed evidence of highly positive relationships between themselves and the school district.

Translator: She said that as far the school is concerned, she said that basically they all respect each other. Uh, they don't . . .

We are here to give support to the school and to find out the benefits that exits for our children, that's it.

A2. It's kind of like the support.

A2. The children and to encourage them to go to school.

A1. She said that everything is fine, that there is really . . . .

A. Everything has been fine up to now, so we haven't really had to say we don't like this or I don't think that is right.

A1. She said that they haven't given them any reason to question anything.

Question on getting information from the district

A2. No, as for information, there is plenty.

Q1. . . . . with the counselors, principals, at meetings.

Q. They want the information?

Q1. There's a lot of information for the parents.

When asked about college readiness and the district information and services these participants expressed a high level of communication between themselves and the school district.

And we as parents have the opportunity to communicate with the counselors, and they can give us advice. They can tell us what our children like and they can attend (college). It's not because there isn't any money . . . .

A1. The counselors help them direct the student as to where they want to go to college. Instead of saying you don't have enough money, yeah you do, we can find it for you.

A. I believe the school works with us parents. We receive a lot of information, like how our kids have the facility to attend college, in regards to preparation and financially. We have many programs where our kids can now go

to college. Now that we have the early enrollment. One of my boys is at the university . . . .

A1. She said that they have the_____, so that way her children can see what it's like to get ready for college.

A. I also have a daughter in junior high. They are already being told about college.

A. They give you so much motivation, whether it be to the students or the parents. Because they have always told us in meetings that we have had, they tell us that there is nothing that can stop us to go to college. There are so many opportunities.

***The Value of Higher Education***

Like the parents in the other focus groups these parents placed a high value on higher education which they saw in highly pragmatic economic terms. The reader should not be confused in this regard. One should remember that the parental volunteers in the Abriendo Puertas initiative are a group of self selected highly motivated individuals. One can assume their perspectives and knowledge of higher education will be more informed than the parents they work with. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, I believed that by talking to these parents I could gain insight into the perceptions of higher education from a larger population of parents.

A1. Sir, many students are in college and a lot of times after the first year, they get out and want nothing to know about college. The just want to work. So you have to continue to motivate and motivate, until they graduate. And teach them to

help in the community, because it's very important where they live, to have relationships with the community. All the needs and all the things that one can help with and the young adults can become something in the future.

Q1. Translator: She said that uh, that they need to realize that they need to keep themselves motivated, so that where they can be someone, uh, I guess like a respectful citizen . . . .

Q1. Translator: or someone with high status and can help in the community. But it's very important.

***Perceptions of higher education institutions***

Following the thread regarding the value of higher education, I queried this group about the level of their knowledge of higher education, focusing on the difference between two and four-year levels of higher education. However, this knowledge tended to associate the community college with career and technical terminal degree programs and not with the academic transfer function of the comprehensive community college.

OK. When you talk about colleges with the other parents, do you talk about STC, or Pan Am, or just college? Is it in general or is it community college specifically?

A. OK, well in part, my daughter was taken to STC. Those were her first steps there at STC. There after STC, she went to Pan Am.

Q1. OK.

Q. So you are talking about two colleges.

A1. They're together, I mean they are in combination both, STC and Pan Am.

A1. As a parent, one speaks about the college STC . . . STC and Pan Am.

Q1. Translator: She said that she talks about both, because she has a daughter who transitioned from . . . .

Q1. . . . . from STC over to Pan Am.

Q1. So of course, it's going to be mentioning both, both colleges will be mentioned.

Q. So they are talking about both? STC and Pan Am?

A. Uh huh, yes.

Q. And do they, uh, do the other parents . . . . does it ever come up that there is a difference? Between STC and Pan Am?

A. Yes, because at STC they only give you the basics.

. (Demonstrated knowledge of general education offered at community college)

A. When you go to Pan Am, the classes are at a higher level, and the studies are much more and you have to work with the community.

A5. This is my 2nd year here in the United States, . . . . comes from Mexico, and I come to understand making a transcription to Mexico, STC is a school of technical careers. And Pan Am is a university for bachelor degrees.

Q. And so what she is saying is that . . . . they understand that STC is more technical?

Q. Equivalent to a technical college in Mexico?

A. Exactly.

A3. Yes, personally my daughters here in high school, I see that they are good students and I say "_____, you have the capacity. It's up you to do the things. If you want a technical career, I'll respect that, but the thing is that you need to be able to defend yourself in life." But do I ask that you become ambitious in your goals and if want a bachelor's degree and its within my means, or if we are able to get some financial support to obtain a degree, then I am much more in favor of a bachelor degree.

A6. What happens, is that once the kids leave high school, the counselors and principals already know what the kids will do, because there is a meeting, with the kids, parents and principals. And from there, what the kids want, they will tell you that you must go to STC and finishing your basics, then you go to Pan Am.

A. It's an option.

A1. Depends what you want. Because here they help you, they give you scholarships. They'll pay you . . . . right, the studies.

A. So why are there so many students pursuing a technical career?

Q1. Why are there a lot of students going to STC?

A. Because of the basics.

.

A2. Because of financial costs. . . .

***Community college dual enrollment program***

These parents also value in the dual enrollment/dual credit program offered by the community college.

A. One other thing that's important, is the program of STC, that the students qualified from grades 11 and 12 to prepare themselves. They graduate from the

12th grade and already have two years of college. Other schools don't have that opportunity.

A1. She said that STC has this program to help, to also help motivate them so that when they graduate, they can just go into college, without any problems.

***Mixed Perceptions About the Level of Parental Participation***

These parents continued to reflect a good foundation of knowledge about higher education, but when queried further as to whether or not this information was getting out to a wider parental audience some incongruities involving the level of participation emerged.

Q. They have a lot of knowledge about college and about the difference between Pan Am and STC, do the other parents have that much information or is it their job to give that information?

A. If they don't have it (information), it's because they don't come.

A1. Because they don't want to.

A1. Because they haven't approached us.

A. Sometimes the parents don't have the time. Some don't have time because of their jobs.

A4. Because of work.

A. They don't want to, or the kids don't want to continue studying.

A1. And because one doesn't know, well.

Q1. Because they don't attend meetings, or they just don't know?

A. We have every week a meeting for all the parents, and only the ones that want to go, go. The ones that are interested.

Q. So it's hard to get more parents?

A. We get a lot of people.

Q. It's hard to get more parents?

A1. No.

A. We encourage or inform other parents, we are going to have another meeting, it is going to be interesting. We call the parents.

Q1. They are interested in going because of the information that is going to be given.

Q. Would they like to see more parents?

A. Oh, yes.

A1. The school sends some bulletins with all the students from every class, to inform that there is a meeting.

A1. But there are kids that don't give them to the parents

Q. Are all the meetings with the parents, are they in Spanish?

A. Yes and English, bilingual.

These parents were sometimes confused if I was asking about them or the parents they work with. What I could gain from these parents was that they themselves were highly motivated and knowledgeable, but that they would like to see higher involvement from other parents.

***Positive Views of Their District and the Wider Educational Community***

These parents displayed an extraordinary positive view of their district and district's educational partners. The negative views discussed by PFG Two of their district were not evident with this group. This district is smaller than the other two districts and has won numerous awards. This was reflected in the following exchange:

Q. Is there anything about this district, this school district, that they think is unique? Compared to other school district in the Rio Grande Valley?

A. Yes, it's real good.

A1. Absolutely.

A. (laughing) We're number 1!

Q. It's an excellent district. Yes.

A. In the top 10 in the nation.

Q. Yes, I know.

Q. Uhm so they know that. They know

A. And the best principal, superintendent in district and now the high school in the nation.

A1. We have in this city the best.

A. Translator: She said that it came out in Univision.

A1. Oh, it's been on . . . . I saw . . . . on ABC.

Q. I think it was on . . . . what do you think that makes this district so special?

A. Special, because we have . . . . we are a united community or district, where we are one team. From the parents, students, administrators, teachers, everyone.

Q. Like a family.

***Communication and involvement with the educational community***

Unlike the parents from the other districts, these parents almost bragged on the high levels of communication and information sharing they have with the school district.

A1. And we have communication.

Q1. There is a lot of communication between the parents and administrators?

A. The people that work in this district look to see what's best for the students and how they could be helped/served. So much that they even offer us English classes and computer classes.

A1. We study ESL . . . .

Q1. They are studying the ESL ?. . . .

A1. Yes, and we go to STC and we have classes on computers.

A. Not all the parents but some…

A4. The community is interested in that they are offering to teach them English courses, computers . . . .

These final comments should be noted by leaders of the community college. One way that might be used to improve the college readiness of prospective college students through parents is to provide adult basic education (ABE), computer literacy, and English as a second language (ESL) courses for parents. Parents who are more literate will be more knowledgeable about the intricacies of college readiness and the financial aid

system. Though these parents may have never been to college, if they are more literate they will be more helpful to their children as they improve their own skill levels.

### *Role of Fathers in Outreach Efforts*

Though poverty is endemic in this community at perhaps greater levels than the other two districts, these parents offered nothing but positive comments about the level of involvement among fathers as well as mothers of children in the district.

A1. And that allows us as mothers, parents to benefit, because we also have fathers, not just mothers . . . . we all better ourselves as a family unit.

A. Also, the meetings for fathers every Wednesday.

Q1. The fathers too?

A. Yes.

Q1. The fathers even get together.

A. They are more interesting.

### *Accessibility of the School District*

At the conclusion of this meeting these parents reiterated a high degree of involvement and accessibility between themselves and the school district in the area of building college readiness in the student population.

Q1. What else is important in helping students be college ready?

A. And we need to give of our time, for example, if they have problems with the kids, they can count on us for support. We quickly have the meetings with parents. Whatever doubt that we may have, well that's why we have the parental meetings. We're interested.

A. And so we are successful with what we propose between the teachers and parents.

A1. I believe that more than anything, it's the teachers . . . .

Q. What did she say about the teachers?

A1. And secondly, it's us.

Q1. She said that first it's the teachers . . . .

A1. Because the teachers are the main ones.

A1. They are like the main thing here. Then principals and then the parents.

Q. So it gives them a way to communicate with teachers and the principal. Yes?

A. Oh, yes. I think that . . . . because the doors for the parents are always open. One can always go talk to the principal at our own time and we are attended to when we arrive, we have communication with them. There is a lot of communication.

A1. They are very attentive to the students' needs.

Q1. For support?

A1. Yes, they are very attentive to the students' assistance, because I have a sister with kids at another school district, and the kids may skip class and the parents never find out. Here if the kids don't go to their first class, we are getting phone calls. They make us aware.

A1. . . . the teachers keep the students in check, that if they are not there, the teachers will call the parents, " hey where is your child. . . . ".

A. I think when we all work for the same goal, and purpose, things do get done. We are all walking in the same direction, and we all want the same results for our kids . . . .

A1. To go basically on the right path.

Like all parents, these parents want a better life for their children. These final comments reflect the enormous pride that these parents have in their community and their school district, and of course, in their kids.

A. I think that all the parents want something more than what we had.

A. In regards to preparation.

Q. Translator: They want more . . . . for their children.

A. In the world, I believe that it's not now to have doctors, or engineers. One has to have a specialty or subspecialty in engineering or medicine, in what ever area, the world is advancing, the technology is advancing a lot. So we always need to stimulate our kids, to see all the needs around us.

*Emergent Themes PFG Three*

Three fundamental themes emerged from PFG Three.

1. These parents have a good knowledge of higher education as demonstrated in their detailed discussion of the differences between two and four-year higher educational institutions, and the role of community college dual enrollment programs
2. These parents, unlike the parents in the other two districts, gave no evidence of stigmatization or intimidation when encountering public education. In fact, these parents repeatedly complimented the accessibility of their district and

demonstrated considerable pride in their schools and their community. All this despite wide-spread poverty in this community. Issues of poverty or immigration status never surfaced in this group discussion.

3. Finally, despite the positive aspects highlighted by these parents, they still indicated participation from other parents was low and not at the level they would like. A phenomenon representing perhaps a sign of the pernicious effects of poverty.

**Conclusions: Parental Focus Groups**

Of the nine themes that emerged from the three parental focus groups one can identify five areas of overlap between them. First, these parental volunteers identify poverty and a set of effects related to it as obstacles to more effective outreach for college readiness. These effects include fear and intimidation among parents in contacting and becoming involved in the schools that the children of these parents attend. Often this fear is based on the immigration status of the parents in question. These parents also report that the members of their communities that they work with lack knowledge of financial aid and thus while they may value higher education for their children, they view it as unattainable in economic terms.

Second and related to the last point, there is qualitative evidence that Latino/a parents value higher education and seek it for their children but they lack the information about how to get it for their families. It is not, as more quantitative evidence conclusively shows (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Cabrera, forthcoming 2008), that Latino/a parents do not have high academic aspirations for their children. As I have said in this chapter, it is

a question of “not knowing about” versus “not wanting” higher education for these families. This lack of “college knowledge” is a phenomena that one might expect among a population where most potential college attendees are the first in their families to seek higher education.

Third, there is no evidence provided by these parents of a gender bias towards male attendance in college and a dissuasion of females to attend college. Some parents state that this phenomenon may have existed in the past, but that now, given pragmatic economic realities and the common desire of all parents for their children to have better lives than themselves, that parents want their daughters to go to college as much as their sons. There was, however, some evidence presented that *where* their daughters go to college might be a factor in that some parents indicated they wanted their daughters to stay close to home.

Fourth, and related to the theme of poverty, there is a disconnection between public education and parents in some of these communities. Some parents are not only intimidated by educational institutions, some feel isolated and shut out. None of this lack of accessibility surfaced in the discussions with professional educators, but it surfaced in a variety ways in the focus group discussions with the parental volunteers. However, like the educators interviewed for this project, these parents are asking for more community based outreach, communication, and information about college readiness from public and higher educational institutions to help close this disconnection.

Finally, specific to the parental volunteers, these parents had a good knowledge of higher education as shown in their relatively easy distinction between two and four-year higher education, their knowledge of remediation at the college level, and their

knowledge of dual enrollment/dual credit course offerings in the high schools provided by the community college. This is a credit to the Abriendo Puertas program and again further evidence of the value that these parents place on higher education.

## Conclusions: Similarities and Differences in the Identified Thematic Clusters

In this section I will list the identifiable thematic clusters across all three groups of participants (superintendents, administrators, and parental volunteers) in this project and highlight similarities and differences across the groups.

### *Superintendents*

The themes that emerged from the one-on-one interviews with the superintendents were:

1. College readiness is a future condition of students based on how well these students perform when they enter higher education.
2. To improve this future condition the superintendents require greater communication from their higher education partners so that they know how their former students are performing, areas of weakness, and how these deficiencies can be improved.
3. The community college was a better, more flexible partner in building collaborative relationships for college readiness than the regional/comprehensive university.
4. The challenges of finding highly qualified teachers were major barriers in improving college readiness for all of the superintendents. These educational leaders took the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of their

students as givens and focused on factors they could control like building partnerships with higher education institutions and hiring more qualified faculty.

### *Focus Groups with Public School Administrators and Mid-level Leaders*

The themes that emerged from the focus groups with the public school administrators were:

1. Definitions of college readiness have a curricular and a behavioral dimension. This second dimension is particularly acute in a potential student population that is largely first-generation college attendees.
2. In order to satisfy this definition of college readiness, greater communication and information sharing with higher education partners is required.
3. Family involvement is a vital component for building college readiness among students in these districts. The outreach for these families should involve both the public schools and the higher education partners.
4. The community college is a flexible and willing partner in efforts to improve college readiness among these students. The four-year higher education partner was described as relatively inflexible.

A point of departure among these groups occurred when participants in Administrative Focus Group Two identified potential low expectations and gender bias among the families in their district. I explored these points in the parental focus groups.

### *Parental Focus Groups*

The themes that emerged from the parental focus groups were as follows:

1. Poverty and its effects are obstacles to more effective outreach for the volunteers from the Abriendo Puertas initiative. Most dramatically, these parents stated that poverty and immigration status intimidate and, in some cases, stigmatize parents against greater participation in college readiness activities for their children.
2. The parents that the Abriendo Puertas volunteers work with value higher education, but they lack the knowledge about how to get it for their children. As I have stated above, college readiness is a question of "not knowing" versus "not wanting" higher education for these families.
3. There was no evidence of gender bias among the volunteers or in their encounters with other parents in male versus female college attendance. There was some evidence that "where" female students attend college was a factor, with a desire expressed by some for female students to stay closer to home.
4. There is a disconnection between public education and parents in some of these communities. These parents want greater accessibility to educational institutions, and greater levels of community based outreach to help remove these disconnects.
5. The parental volunteers in the Abriendo Puertas Initiative have a good knowledge of higher education; a reflection of the value they place on a college education for their children.

### *Areas of Overlap and Linkage Across the Groups and Thematic Clusters*

There are two main areas of overlap and interrelated linkages that one can identify across the thematic clusters derived from the activities with these groups.

First, *communication and information* sharing from higher education to public education is a vital component in improving the college readiness of students in these districts. For superintendents this communication and information sharing took the form of knowledge about how well their students perform in college. For mid-level administrators this process should take the form of curricular alignment and outreach efforts to enhance the contextual knowledge that potential college attendees have of the requirements and behaviors expected of them by what David Conley (2007) has termed "the college culture." For parents, information and communication should come from all educational partners in the form of greater levels of access and outreach taking place at the community level. Parents in these communities want higher education for their children but they do not necessarily know how to get it, particularly in the area of financial aid opportunities. Affected by poverty, relatively low educational levels, and potential undocumented immigration status, these parents reported that greater levels of outreach and access to education at all levels can help bridge a disconnection that they saw as existing in some of their communities and neighborhoods.

Second, among the education professionals (superintendents and administrators), *the community college was portrayed as a more flexible partner* in enhancing college readiness than the regional/comprehensive four-year university. This is not surprising given that partnerships of varying types are a vital component to the success of many community colleges (see Roueche, Taber, and Roueche, 1995, and Roueche and Jones

Eds. 2005, and Roueche, Richardson, Neal, and Roueche Eds., 2008 for example). Furthermore, given the extensive dual enrollment and outreach programs of South Texas College, the groundwork for these partnerships already exists in these school districts.

*Points of Divergence Across the Thematic Clusters and Groups*

There are three main points of divergence that emerged from the interviews and focus group activities engaged in for this project.

First, the only set of respondents that saw teacher qualification as a potential barrier to enhancing college readiness among the potential population of college attendees was the superintendents. These educational leaders accepted the socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges faced by their students as givens.

Second, Administrative Focus Group Two identified potential low expectations and gender bias as factors that might hinder college readiness in their district. Parents in this district portrayed a disconnect between themselves and the district in the most compelling ways. There may be a connection between these two observations for this district and they will be included in a list of future research topics contained in Chapter Five. There was no evidence of gender bias per se' uncovered in any of the parental focus groups (with the exception of comments by members of some groups about "where" female students might attend college). This last point may represent a form of gender bias in that perceptions like this might place limits the range of possible higher education opportunities for potential female college students. This being said, the parental volunteers and (according to them) the parents they work with, place a high value on higher education, thus helping to dispel the myth that Latino/a parents do not want higher education for their children.

Finally, Parental Focus Group Three also had much more positive views of their school district in the areas of accessibility to the schools and their school leaders. These parents were proud and knowledgeable about their district, yet they still desired higher levels of parental participation in their activities.

In this chapter I have presented data gathered from three interviews and six focus groups with educational leaders and parental volunteers across three school districts served by South Texas College. I have identified common themes and issues that emerged from this data. I have compared these themes and issues, seeking common linkages as well divergences that will help answer the research questions posed in Chapter One of this treatise. These answers and insights may have practical applications for both the college and me as an educational practitioner. I will provide these research answers and practical recommendations in the following chapter, as well as list of future research questions that have been raised by this inquiry.

# CHAPTER 5 - INTERPRETATIONS

In this chapter I will apply the results from the data analyzed in Chapter 4 to the six research questions presented in Chapter One. Acknowledging some overlap between the research questions and the applied nature of this treatise, I will also use my interpretations of the data to establish a set of recommendations for practical application to the college readiness efforts of South Texas College and its related partnerships with school districts in its service area. Germane to the practical applications of this research and related to the action research orientation of this project; I will provide a discussion of my own professional growth that has occurred as a result of the study. Much of this discussion will be included in my answer to Research Question Five. Finally, given the exploratory nature of qualitative research and data collection, I will suggest plausible avenues for future research on the subject of college readiness and the community college. Also, related research questions that I have derived from a review of the relevant literature on this topic will be included in this final section.

## ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Many of the applied aspects of this chapter can be answered through the answers provided to the research questions of this project. The six research questions posed in Chapter One of this treatise were:

1. What are the factors that emerge from the data that can inform collaboration between a community college and public school systems in the college's service area as these organizations work together to improve the process of better preparing high school students for college level work?
2. How do public school superintendents and other public school administrators perceive and make meaning of the issue of college readiness and how do these perceptions qualitatively vary across communities within an ethnically homogenous, yet economically diverse region of Texas?
3. What are the perceptions of the community college by public school leaders, and how do these perceptions influence their responses to college readiness policy directives?
4. How do parental facilitators and participants of and within a family outreach group in this region perceive the importance of college readiness and are there qualitative differences between familial perceptions of college readiness and those of educational professionals? If so, how can these familial perceptions inform decision making at educational administrative levels? What matters most to parents of this region in the education of their children? This data can also be used to look for qualitative variations in these perceptions across an ethnically homogeneous region.

5. How can I as a researcher positioned inside the community college and already working on the issue of college readiness learn and grow as a professional and learn more about a community that I am not part of culturally or linguistically?
6. How can the answers to these questions be used to help community college leaders develop a more effective college readiness initiative with the public schools in its service area?

What is readily apparent from these research questions is the applied nature of each question. Question One is based on information to improve general collaboration between the college and the public schools in its service area to better prepare potential students for college success (college readiness). Question Two is a follow-up to Question One and attempts to improve the process of enhancing the college readiness of potential students in a two-fold manner. First, this question seeks to determine if there are differences in the way educational professionals define college readiness. Second, are there differences among these educators in these definitions that might improve the collaborative processes of college readiness between the college and the public schools its serves? Question Three concerns perceptions of the community college and can provide decision makers at the college with an enhanced view of the community and the perceptions within the community of the institution, particularly as these views pertain to the issue of college readiness. Question Four is similar to Question Two, yet the focus of this research question is on parents within this community and how they perceive the issue of college readiness. Answers to this research question will help the college improve its outreach efforts in the area of building and enhancing college readiness at the community level. Question Five keeps within the action research method of this project

in that its focus is on my professional growth as a college readiness director and advocate for college readiness programs at the community college. Finally, Question Six is summative, attempting to tie all the answers to the previous questions together in a coherent set of recommendations for a set of comprehensive college readiness programs at the college.

**Research Question One**

> *What are the factors that emerge from the data that can inform collaboration between a community college and public school systems in the college's service area as these organizations work together to improve the process of better preparing high school students for college level work?*

The factors that emerged from the data that can best inform collaboration between the community college and its public school partners can be found under the general heading of *communication and information sharing* between the college and the school districts. Many of these informational aspects are found in the questions asked about definitions and perceptions of college readiness across the range of participants in this project.

For superintendents this communication and information sharing took the form of knowledge exchanges about how well their graduates perform in college. These top-level public school administrators seek data on the numbers of their former students that enroll in college, the number that matriculate into developmental/remedial education courses, and the retention and transfer rates for these student cohorts. In 2006 STC began a process of exchanging this kind of data with school districts in its service area (See Appendix A and B1-3 of this treatise). However, as of 2008, to the knowledge of this researcher, the college has not followed up on this process of information exchange. The

superintendents interviewed for this project seek more of this information accompanied by specific actions to improve both the numbers and performance of their students matriculating at the community college. The college should do so, and use organizations like the recently created Lower Rio Grande P-16 Council as well as various state-wide efforts to enhance college readiness to facilitate this process of information exchange and communication.

I will provide further discussion of my role as a college readiness professional on the P-16 Council and in these state-wide efforts in my discussion of my own professional growth and my answers to research Question Five. Mid-level administrators generally said that this process should take the form of curricular alignment and outreach efforts to enhance the contextual knowledge that potential college attendees have of the requirements and behaviors expected of them by what David Conley (2007a, 2007b) has termed "the college culture." For parents, information and communication should come from all educational partners in the form of greater levels of access and outreach taking place at the community level.

The need for this kind of communication and information sharing to enhance the college readiness of prospective college students has been well researched and articulated by advocates of *signaling theory* in educational reform. Advocates of signaling theory state that higher education decision-makers and planners need to do a better job of communicating their expectations and standards to their colleagues at the K-12 level. In Chapter Two of this treatise (pp. 47-51) I documented the work of several scholars in this area (see for example Fuhrman & O'Day, 1996, Kirst & Venezia Eds. 2004, Kirst & Bracco 2004, Bueschel 2004).

What I have found missing from this literature is a more thorough discussion of the kind of communication necessary for a student population that is overwhelmingly Latino/a and more often than not the first members of their families to attend college. Kirst and Venezia (2004, pp. 64-64) for example state the following:

> Many students in accelerated curricular tracks in high school than do their peers on other tracks. Many students in middle or lower level high school courses are not reached by postsecondary outreach efforts or by college counseling staff in their high schools. Many economically disadvantaged parents lack the experience and information concerning college preparation.
>
> In Illinois, Maryland, and Oregon, 42 percent, 44 percent, and 47 percent, respectively, of economically disadvantaged parents stated that they received college information, as compared to with 74 percent, 71 percent, and 66 percent of their more economically well-off counterparts.

These educational researchers acknowledge the problem of college readiness information sharing and the connection of this information to low income, first generation students and their families, and recommend that *all* students and their parents receive "accurate, high quality information about and access to courses that will help prepare students for college-level standards" (Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 68). They also recommend that dual enrollment/dual credit college courses be made available to all students, and not just students who are traditionally "college bound" (p. 70). Clearly identification of the problem is not lacking in this and the related literature. What I believe is lacking within this literature is a more detailed explanation about what kind of outreach and college readiness communication will best suit a population that is of an ethnic group faced with the challenges of poverty, language barriers, legal impediments to success, and related elements of social stigma.

Similarly, David Conley (2005, 2007) places a strong emphasis on curricular and assessment design, curricular alignment, and the cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities

students will need to succeed in college level courses. However Conley is relatively silent on the socio-cultural aspects of college readiness. Conley's definition of college readiness (2007b) has value and is parsimonious:

> In a general sense, college readiness can be defined as a the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit bearing general education course at a post-secondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program (p. 1-2).

Conley's work has had a major influence on the development of college readiness standards for high schools in the State of Texas.[21] Little is said, however, in his work about how these curricular changes will be implemented across specific student populations. While the curricular, cognitive, and meta-cognitive expectations put forward by Conley are high, will Latino/a students need different kinds of learning support structures to meet these standards? Will relatively poor and perhaps geographically remote school districts have the capacity to implement the standards and provide learning support for their students? Will these same types of school districts have enough qualified faculty to deliver the kind of rigorous curriculum called for by reformers like David Conley? The answers are far from obvious, but I will provide further elucidation of the kind of communication and support needed from higher education in my discussion of Latino/a families and college readiness below (Research Question Four).

[21] I will provide a discussion in the professional growth section of this chapter of my role as a member of a legislatively authorized state-wide curricular vertical team (social studies) that wrote a draft of these standards in 2007. These standards will be implemented in the state in the English/language arts content area in 2009, with the content areas of mathematics, natural science, and social studies to follow sequentially in 2010, 2011, and 2012.

**Research Question Two**

> *How do public school superintendents and other public school administrators perceive and make meaning of the issue of college readiness and how do these perceptions qualitatively vary across communities within an ethnically homogenous, yet economically diverse region of Texas?*

In Chapter Four, I was able to discern differences in the way the superintendents interviewed defined college readiness versus the way that administrative teams assembled in each district did the same. One will recall that superintendents had a two-fold interpretation of what is meant by the term *college readiness*:

> 1. College readiness is a future condition of students based on how well these students perform when they enter higher education.
>
> 2. To improve this future condition the superintendents require greater communication from their higher education partners so that they know how their former students are performing.

The student success aspect of this definition is similar to that put forward by David Conley. The communicative aspects of this definition are in keeping with the research on signaling theory discussed above. The recommendation that emanates from this finding is that the college should continue and follow up on the data sharing initiatives it began with its public school partners in 2006 (see Appendix A and B1-3).

From the focus groups with the administrative teams in each district and the relevant literature on college readiness, I have been able to derive the following definition of college readiness:

> College readiness has two dimensions. First, college readiness involves increasing the rigor and aligning the curriuculum of secondary education with the postsecondary level to increase the likihood of post-secondary success in non-remedial, entry level courses. Second, enhancing certain behavioral and affective characteristics among potential college students is necessary to increase the

> liklihood of college success for these students. This second dimension should take into account socio-cultural factors and parental involvement.

From this definition of college readiness, again, one sees a close connection to the curricular and affective defintions of college readiness put forward by Conley (2005, 2007b). It is also important to note that the administrative teams placed a stronger emphasis on the socio-cultural needs of first generation, Latino/a high school students than did the superintendents. As I noted in Chapter Four, my interpretation of the superintendent responses was that they viewed socio-cultural factors like poverty and language barriers as immutable factors that they could not control. On the other hand, the public school adminstrators (that in some groups included outreach counselors) stressed that college readiness should include programs that are sensitive to this population and its needs and challenges.

There was, therefore, a divergence across the groups of educators interviewed for this project, with second tier administrators placing a greater emphasis on affective and socio-cultural aspects of the student population. There was also a greater emphasis on socio-cultural factors involving gender in the responses from educators in District 2. District 2 responses from the administrative team were anomalous from the other groups in that this group stated they had perceptions of gender bias amongst parents in their district concerning females and college attendance. At this point I am unable to determine the nature of this anomaly. It may be a limitation in the research method. Perhaps another group of administrators would have conveyed different ideas on this subject, but one should remember that the superintendents assembled these teams of focus group members from the staff that they believed were closest to the issue of college readiness in their respective districts. Again, parental perceptions of these issues can help College

readiness practitioners formulate a more nuanced definition of college readiness and a corresponding set of recommendations to inform these processes for the college.

**Research Question Three**

*What are the perceptions of the community college by public school leaders, and how do these perceptions influence their responses to college readiness policy directives?*

The perceptions of the community college by both sets of public school leaders (superintendents and second tier administrators) were positive. As I have documented in Chapter Four, the community college was viewed by the school superintendents as a more flexible partner in building collaborative relationships for college readiness than the regional/comprehensive university. Similarly, the focus groups of public school administrators saw the community college as a flexible and willing partner in efforts to improve college readiness among these students. The four-year higher education partner was described as relatively inflexible. At this point I should note an important limitation to this finding. As an identified member of the community college administrative team, a fact known by the interviewees, I can not rule out the possibility that participants in this project were not telling me what they believed I wanted to hear. Again, a qualitative researcher cannot separate his or herself from their positionality. This is true at a professional, socio-cultural, racial/ethnic, and/or gender based level. Nevertheless, this finding concerning the flexibility and collaborative nature of the community college is well documented within the field of community college research. Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer (2003) have noted that much of the flexibility of the community college can be traced to a history and institutional commitment to open access to all students

within a given community. The goals of the community college, according to these scholars, were to "serve the people with whatever the people wanted" (p. 29). Similarly, sociologist and community college president David Levinson (2005) has noted that community colleges "market their services to an array of constituents" and that they "incubate new programs in ways that bring them into the curriculum more quickly" (p. 203). Richard Voorhees (2005) in his analysis of community college finance has noted that community colleges are more heavily dependent on state and local tax revenues than four-year public universities. To serve local taxpayers, community colleges, according to Voorhees, must respond quickly to new educational demands (p. 481). In a recent case study analysis of high school counselor perceptions of a community college, Yvonne Mitkos and Debra Bragg (2008) have found that older stereotypes of the community college as a college of last resort among high school guidance counselors no longer hold true. The counselors interviewed in this report viewed the community college as an institution of high and improving quality that could offer certain advantages to students in affordability and proximity to where students live.

I have noted throughout this treatise the documented cases of community college partnership and collaboration compiled by John and Suanne Roueche and a host of co-editors and collaborators. Most recently, Roueche, Richardson, Neal, and Roueche (2008) have noted a theme of P-16 partnership and college transition that can be identified from the essays of 13 college presidents and educational leaders on the subject of creativity and innovation in the community college. According to Roueche et. al (2008), "teamwork with local school districts and 4-year institutions has become an integral source of information that identifies where students are dropping out, what critical

learning needs to happen for retaining skill development, and the requirements that must be met for transfer" (p. 244).

This observation fits well with the recommendation that South Texas College should continue its work to share data with its public school partners on the numbers of students that attend the college from different high schools and school districts, whether or not these students require remediation, and if so in what content and skill areas, and how well these students perform at the institution as a longitudinally measured cohort (see Appendix A and B1-3).

The college's history of flexibility and partnership with local school districts is also well illustrated in its robust dual enrollment program that presently enrolls over 7,000 students across 18 school districts and 42 high school sites within these districts. Finally, this willingness to partner to with the K-12 educational level can be seen in the commencement of four early college high schools with four school districts in the last two years. These initiatives require extensive collaboration between the public school district and the college at both the planning and day-to-day operational levels. Some of these partnerships were initiated relatively quickly given the vicissitudes of grant funding that were beyond the control of the college. I will provide further comment on the college's early college high schools in my discussion of my professional growth in the answers to Research Question Five of this chapter.

**Research Question Four**

*How do parental facilitators and participants of and within a family outreach group in this region perceive the importance of college readiness and are there qualitative differences between familial perceptions of college readiness and those of educational professionals? If so, how can these familial perceptions inform decision making at*

*educational administrative levels? What matters most to parents of this region in the education of their children? This data can also be used to look for qualitative variations in these perceptions across an ethnically homogeneous region*

In Chapter Four I presented qualitative data that indicated the parental volunteers in the Abriendo Puertas Initiative placed a high value on college attendance and college readiness for their children. These parents also reported that this was true for the parents they encountered and worked with in their respective communities. This finding is not too surprising given the self-selected character of the Abreindo Puertas volunteers.

However, in the parental focus groups themes emerged that should be of concern to planners within both the community college and the public schools in this region. The parents in two focus groups interviewed for this project reported that many of the parents and families they work with feel isolated and in some cases stigmatized from the public educational system. For these parents, the effects of poverty, language barriers, and immigration status are impediments to more active involvement in the educational lives of their children. In studying the responses of the parental volunteers and comparing these responses to those of the educators, a phenomenon emerged that I will term "peeling back the layers of the onion." At the outer level, the superintendents did not spend much time discussing socio-cultural factors and college readiness. As I have previously noted, these factors were taken as givens by these high level public school administrators. At the second level, the teams of public school administrators assembled in these districts did mention socio-cultural factors (particularly the administrator group from District Two), but the main concern of these educators were the cognitive and affective aspects of college readiness for the students in their respective districts. Finally at the inner level, for parents "on the ground" in these districts, working with other

parents and families, socio-cultural factors were discussed more often and in some cases these factors emerged as barriers and disjunctions between the parents in question and the school districts.

It should be noted that the superintendents and administrators live in these communities and may even have children attending schools in these districts. Why then would socio-cultural barriers be more prominent on the minds of parents than the educational professionals interviewed for this project? While I did not gather more detailed demographic and socio-economic data on the participants in this project, it is obvious that the higher educational attainment levels of the first two sets of participants and the fact that two sets of participants are educational professionals, while the third (parental volunteers) are not paid employees of the school districts, are part of the answer to this question. Future research should explore the nature of professional views of college readiness versus those of non-professionals or para-professionals within this community.

At the socio-cultural level the question of gender bias also emerged as a topic of discussion. The data presented in Chapter Four indicates that parents want their daughters to attend college as much as their sons, but there were some indications that parents wanted their daughters to stay closer to home to attend college. At the general level, this finding is indirectly supported by longitudinal statistical data conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Cabrera, forthcoming 2008). This study of HERI data collected between 1975 and 2006 found that Latina first year college students at four-year universities have consistently had higher degree aspirations and voiced stronger parental

support for going to college than non-white males and females surveyed annually by HERI. If there is a college readiness and college-going barrier for potential Latina college students, it is geographic in nature. Further research should explore if parents in this region want to keep their daughters in college closer to home, thus limiting the range of higher education choices available for these young women, or if this finding is more anecdotal.

How should the data gathered from the parental volunteers inform decision making for college readiness by the college? The most important observation that emerged from the parental focus groups was that these parents expressed a sense of "not knowing about" versus "not wanting" higher education for the families they work with.. As I stated in Chapter Four, this lack of "college knowledge" is a phenomena that one might expect among a population where most potential college attendees are the first in their families to seek higher education. This lack of information was particularly acute in the area of knowledge about college financial aid opportunities available to low income families. Parents facing language and immigration barriers (though their children may not) may be intimidated by the complexity of financial aid processes. How, for instance, does an undocumented resident of Hidalgo County, Texas report income on a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) even when their son or daughter was born in the United States, and even though the FAFSA document is available in Spanish? College financial aid professionals should work with the college's outreach specialists and the public school districts in the region to address these questions bilingually at the community level. Grassroots groups like Abriendo Puertas should also be an integral part of these outreach partnerships for college readiness. This kind of community based

educational outreach for Latino parents and communities has been well illustrated in case studies by other researchers (Reyes, Scribner, & Reyes Eds., 1999; Auerbach 2004; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006).

One insight gained from the parents in District Three was the value they placed on the community college's efforts in the area of Adult Basic Education (ABE) in the areas of English as a Second Language (ESL) and computer literacy. The college should consider the provision of ABE programs as a component of a more holistic college readiness outreach effort. Parents with increased levels of language and technical literacy will be better informed about the value of higher education and many of the intricacies of higher education enrollment, financial aid, and academic preparation for their children will be demystified. Furthermore, sense ABE programs are a traditional part of the services offered by the comprehensive community college, these parents familiarity with the college will be enhanced.

The educational professionals who participated in this study should heed the words of parents who expressed concerns that they felt isolated and cut off from the public schools. This was especially pronounced in the statements from parents in District Two. These districts should address way to make parents feel more welcome and less intimidated by the schools and school personnel. District Two stands out as a district where both parents and second tier administrators voiced concerns about socio-cultural and gender based barriers to college readiness. This district should be studied further to ascertain the nature of these barriers and disjunctions more precisely.

**Research Question Five**

> *How can I as a researcher positioned inside the community college and already working on the issue of college readiness learn and grow as a professional and learn more about a community that I am not part of culturally or linguistically?*

The answers to this question were developed through a reflective process based in part on notes and observations compiled in a personal journal kept during the research activities associated with this project. Through this reflection I realized I was an "outsider looking in" both in the professional lives of the educators I interviewed and most profoundly in the lives of the parents who participated in this project. I have noted above a limitation and how I was unable to tell if the responses I gathered from the educators may have been biased because of my status as a member of the administrative and faculty team at South Texas College. I believe, however, my outsider status is deeper than this methodological limitation among these educators for two reasons. First, I have limited professional experience working at the K-12 level of public education. In the past, while in graduate school in California, I worked as a substitute teacher at the middle and high school level and while in Texas I have taught dual enrollment/dual credit sections of American government at two high schools in the service area of STC. Still, this experience is limited and I do not face the challenges of public school educators on a day by day basis. Second, I am not Latino and I do not speak Spanish. I noticed during the research activities with these educators (who were overwhelmingly Latino/a) that occasionally these individuals would use Spanish colloquialisms, leaving me somewhat in the dark as to what they were talking about. I have noticed this in my day to day work at the college as well even though I have worked there since 1999.

In the focus group activities with the parental volunteers these feelings of "outsiderness" were even more pronounced. These activities were conducted bilingually with the assistance of a translator. My whiteness and "Angloness" were simply more self-evident in these activities. I am not from these communities and while my father was a first generation college attendee, I am not, and growing up I enjoyed the privileges of an upper-middle class background that as an educator I still experience. While I make an effort to connect to lived experience of parents and students in the community I serve, I realize through the reflective process of this research that I can never truly complete the process of being part of this community.

At a professional level I have begun to overcome the barrier of "outsiderness" in two ways. First, in 2007 the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) selected me to serve on a statewide curricular vertical team (social studies) (CRVT). The purpose of these teams was to develop draft college readiness standards that would later be infused into the curricular standards used by secondary education in the State of Texas. The work of these teams was facilitated, under contract, by the Education Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), a research and outreach organization of the College of Education at the University Oregon, led by David Conley. Each team in the content areas of mathematics, English/language arts, natural science, and social studies was composed of six faculty representatives from higher education and four representatives from secondary education. The selection process for the higher education representatives by the THECB was based on experience teaching entry level courses in content areas and familiarity with college readiness and curricular alignment. The Texas Education

Agency (TEA) used a similar process for the selection of representatives from the secondary educational level.

In Phase I of the process wherein the draft of the standards was prepared, the teams were purposely weighted in a 6:4 ratio in favor of higher education; the reason being higher education curricular expectations would be compared to the everyday realities faced by secondary teachers. It was indeed in this process that I as an educator became more familiar with the challenges faced by my colleagues at the secondary level. I developed a better understanding, at a curricular level, of the scope of and sequence of instruction at the secondary level. I also developed a clearer picture of the issues secondary teachers face in an era of so-called high stakes testing.

The second removal of my professional "veil of ignorance" regarding secondary education has occurred through my involvement in early college high schools (ECHS) at South Texas College. In 2007, because of my research for this treatise, I became involved with a team composed of both STC and school district staff in preparation of a grant for a an early college high school funded by the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project. At this time I was also appointed by the Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the college as the higher education liaison for another early college high school in the service area of the college funded by TEA. Subsequently two more school districts in Hidalgo County received an early college high school grants from TEA. Presently, I serve as the point of contact for four ECHS initiatives in which the college is a partner. I have also reviewed ECHS grant proposals for TEA from other regions of the state. This day-to-day exposure to ECHS administrators, teachers, and

students has increased my professional familiarity with the challenges faced by these educators and students.

The third way, as yet unrealized, wherein I can begin the process of breaking down these barriers is to learn the Spanish language. In my nine years of service at STC I have often told myself the value of taking Spanish language courses but like many busy professionals I have never found the time. I know this knowledge would be imperfect, but it would begin the process of developing a better professional and personal understanding of this community. The completion of this treatise will, I believe, open up an opportunity, time-wise, to begin this second language acquisition. One should note that this is a purely personal belief on my part and is in keeping with the action research component of this project.

**Research Question Six**

> *How can the answers to these questions be used to help community college leaders develop a more effective college readiness initiative with the public schools in its service area?*

The answer to this question represents the summation of the findings of this research project. From the answers to the previous questions a list of recommendations for the college can be readily developed. This list is as follows:

1. The college should follow up on its efforts to share data on student matriculation from the various districts in its service area. This data should be disaggregated by high school and by district, and by the areas of deficiency for these students defined by the levels and content areas of remediation that these students may need. If students matriculating from a particular district (or high school within a

district) show a marked deficiency in a skill area, definitive action items to address these deficiencies should be developed to collaboratively intervene with the district and/or school before potential college attendees graduate from high school.

2. The college should continue its efforts through its local P-16 Council, its early college high school partnerships, and its large dual enrollment program to align curricula across the P-16 continuum. As I have written in an article for the THECB, early college high schools are excellent vehicles to bridge the curricular gaps between the expectations of higher education and the realities of public education (Johnson, 2008). Curriculum alignment is a form of professional communication at a relatively in-depth level and as such will require a large commitment of time and human resources from both the public education and higher education levels.
3. Outreach efforts for parents and student should be expanded to the community level and the college should work closely with groups like Abriendo Puertas. These efforts should be bilingual and should take place in neighborhoods, at community centers, and in churches. These activities should place an emphasis on financial aid opportunities, as well as the kinds of knowledge and skills that students will need to be successful in higher education. Given the socio-cultural composition of this region, these efforts should use the personal stories of former and current college students and their parents (see Auerbach, 2004). These outreach efforts will also help break down many of the barriers and obstacles that that the parents surveyed for this project felt hindered many other parents from a

more complete level of participation in the educational lives of their children. The college should seek to incorporate ABE into a more comprehensive outreach effort (see p. 229).

4. The college should explore ways to use its comparative advantage in the area of organizational flexibility to enhance the college readiness of its potential student population. Despite increasing college enrollment, vast numbers of students in this region do not seek out the opportunities offered by higher education. Partnerships with public education are expansive and increasing, but the college should also leverage its connections with the business community and governmental leaders to enhance the college readiness of all students in this region. The college has already begun this process through annual college readiness summits, community engagement activities and related focus groups funded in part by its *Achieving the Dream-Community Colleges Count* (Lumina Foundation) grant. Being a Round One, Achieving the Dream college, this grant is coming to an end during the 2008-09 academic year, but the college should explore ways to continue and follow up on the activities begun by this transformative grant.
5. Finally, at the professional level, the college should explore the possibility of enhancing its professional development opportunities for faculty who do not speak Spanish. While the college does offer fee and tuition waivers for faculty and staff who take classes at the institution, lately these waivers have been reduced due to costs, the processes for taking classes under the waiver are not streamlined, and there are accompanying rules of two-year time commitments of

service to the college after one uses the tuition and fee waiver. This last aspect of the program may hinder increasingly mobile professionals from signing up for the service. A completely free Spanish language program with no future service requirement would encourage greater participation for faculty and staff. Again, this particular recommendation is based on personal insight gained from this project.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Throughout this project I have noted the exploratory nature of the research and wherever possible noted opportunities for future research. Also, in the survey of the relevant literature in Chapter Two I identified several avenues for future research.

From the data presented in Chapter Four, the answers to the research questions presented in this chapter, plus the review of the relevant literature provided in Chapter Two, I have identified the following research questions:

1. At the broadest level, how can the signals and definitions of college readiness be improved to take into account the socio-cultural dimensions unique to an area that is overwhelmingly Latino/a? As I have stated in Chapter Two of this treatise, does signaling theory and better communication across educational levels overcome the barriers that poor Hispanic students face in standardized testing and the obstacles that financial hardship imposes on these students? Does an academic culture that in some ways is imposed on Latino/a students from the outside hinder both their academic preparedness and their academic success? The answers to these questions are broader than the scope of this project, but they should be

explored through a more thorough research agenda that includes ethnographic cases studies and mixed methods research, as well surveys of all stakeholder groups that are relevant to college readiness in the region.

**2**. Also derived from the literature surveyed in Chapter Two, in the larger context of American higher education, are *Native Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)* as opposed to *Transitional HSIs*, *better* prepared to serve the needs of their students? One should recall here a common criticism of the federally imposed classification of HSI. To qualify as an HSI, institutions of higher education must have at least 25 percent of their student population identified as Hispanic and at least 50 percent of their students on some form of means tested financial aid. Demographically, this means that some colleges transition in to HSI status and may be ill prepared to serve the needs of these students (Flores, Horn & Crisp 2006). As I have noted in Chapter Two, STC however, is what might be termed a *Native HSI*, in that its location along the U.S.-Mexico border has guaranteed its HSI status from its inception to the present day. Native HSIs, when compared to transitional HSIs, may have advantages in serving this student population. Native HSIs may have greater cultural sensitivity and greater numbers of Latino/a faculty and staff for example. More extensive research that compares student success measures like student persistence, graduation rates, and student achievement in *native* versus *transitional* HSIs should be developed. A researcher could then determine if indeed Native HSIs had advantages over transitional HSIs and whether or not these advantages could be passed on to the latter.

**3**. Throughout this treatise and within the literature much has been said about the importance of dual enrollment/dual credit programs for building the kind of relationships across educational levels to enhance the college readiness of potential students. They may also aid in the development of what might be termed a "college-going" culture among the students of high-schools with extensive dual enrollment programs, and provide more opportunities for advanced students to earn college credit while still in high school. This latter effect of dual enrollment programs is, I believe, an area with potential for future study. Because entry into dual enrollment programs is usually merit based, attention should also focus on whether or not these programs aid more socio-economically affluent high school students. One way to begin this kind of analysis would be to collect data as to how many students in dual enrollment programs receive and free and reduced lunch compared to how many do not; a typical measure of the socio-economic status of public school students. This is a research project that both an institutional research office at a college might undertake, as well a project for an individual researcher. If it was discovered that these programs were more heavily enrolled by students from more affluent backgrounds, a college could explore ways to expand the program to less advantaged students.

**4**. Unique to the data gathered for this treatise; there were discernable differences in the perceptions of both second tier administrators and parents in District Two and the other two districts studied for this project. Some administrators perceived gender based biases among parents in their district, while the parents in this district felt isolated from the district. More research on this district is required to

understand these issues. Are there unique characteristics that could be uncovered through a more in-depth case study of this district, accompanied by a survey instrument aimed specifically at these issues within this district? Are there sharp divergences between educational elites and low income parents regarding obstacles to college readiness? What might these methods reveal about large, growing, overwhelmingly Latino/a public school districts and the relationship between socio-cultural factors and prospective college attendance? An ethnographic study of this district is also an avenue of research likely to reveal a deeper understanding of a school district and a community in transition; as is the Rio Grande Valley in general.

**5**. Related to future research question four, how pervasive is the phenomena of what I have identified as geographically based gender bias in this population? Do Latino/a parents limit the higher education opportunities for their daughters by wanting them to obtain higher education but limit them by insisting that they stay close to home, or was this observation merely anecdotal? Again, mixed research methodologies should be used to explore this question, especially given the increasing numbers and the high academic aspirations of Latinas in higher education (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Cabrera, forthcoming 2008).

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have provided answers based on the data presented and analyzed in Chapter Four to six research questions first identified in Chapter One of this treatise. These answers have led to five practical recommendations for South Texas College to

implement in order to enhance its college readiness efforts with public school districts in the college's service area. I have also discussed aspects of personal and professional growth that I have experienced, in part, as a result of my involvement in this project. Finally, I have identified five areas of future research that have been derived from the relevant literature on college readiness reviewed in Chapter Two, as well as potential research questions that have emerged as a result of this project.

This project has taken me down unexpected paths. The initial action research iterative cycles envisioned in an earlier draft were abandoned as unfeasible; yet the discovery of the Abriendo Puertas Initiative provided a window into the lives of parents and families in this region that was wholly unexpected. My interviews with public school superintendents and focus groups with other public school administrators provided insight and added dimension to my knowledge of public education in this region that I could never have gotten had I not embarked on this project two years ago. I have acknowledged limitations of both the research methods I have employed in this project, and limitations of a more personal nature having to do with my position as an Anglo, monolingual college educator. Given all this, I have developed a better understanding of the community I serve in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

The fundamental goal of this project was, however, to help the leaders of the community college in this region develop a better understanding of the public school partners, and the parents and families who will soon be sending students to the college. College readiness and P-16 reform are educational issues whose time has come and the community college is at the heart of these efforts. South Texas College is rapidly emerging as a leader in the community college world and its efforts in the area of college

readiness, dual enrollment/dual credit course offerings, and community based outreach are already noteworthy. The enhancement and further development of the relationships necessary to build and sustain the college readiness of a large potential population of college students are a team effort of dedicated educators both inside and outside of the college. It is my sincere hope that my efforts in this project will only add to the exemplary work that hundreds of faculty, staff, and administrators are already putting forth at the college. It is an honor and a privilege to work with them every day.

# APPENDIX A – SAMPLE COLLEGE READINESS REPORT

South Texas College
2006 College Readiness Report

# SAMPLE ISD

## A Message From STC President Shirley Reed

We are pleased to introduce to you South Texas College's first annual College Readiness Report. The 2006 reports have been customized for each ISD and public high school in Hidalgo and Starr counties to aid school officials and members of their boards in examining the impact their curriculum and instruction are having on the success of their graduates attending college.

Preparing each and every high school student for college level work has become the expected standard in Texas and the nation. Now more than ever public and post-secondary education must work hand-in-hand to bridge the gap and ensure the future success of college bound high school graduates.

We hope this report assists you in evaluating and strengthening the level and quality of college readiness in each and every future graduate in your school district.

## About the Report

In February 2006 South Texas College hosted the first **Summit on College Readiness** during which over 150 local educators and administrators from public schools, South Texas College, The University of Texas Pan American and community business professionals were in attendance. That day marked the beginning of a new era in collaboration among all area education agencies to improve the rate of educational attainment in the region and, ultimately, to improve the quality of life in our communities.

During the Summit, South Texas College made a commitment to continue the dialogue and collaboration in several ways. One way was to provide data unique to each school district that could be shared across that district to increase awareness and collaboration among constituents.

This report provides information about cohorts of high school graduating classes from your district and provides a description of those who selected to enroll at South Texas College to continue their progress toward a college certificate or degree.

## Sample ISD Graduates

| Sample ISD | Class of | Class of | Class of | Class of | Class of |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HS Graduates [1] | 648 | 642 | 552 | 612 | 609 |
| Enrolled at STC Same Fall | 145 | 119 | 108 | 83 | 99 |
| % of HS Class | 22% | 19% | 19% | 14% | 16% |

[1] Source: TEA

College Readiness

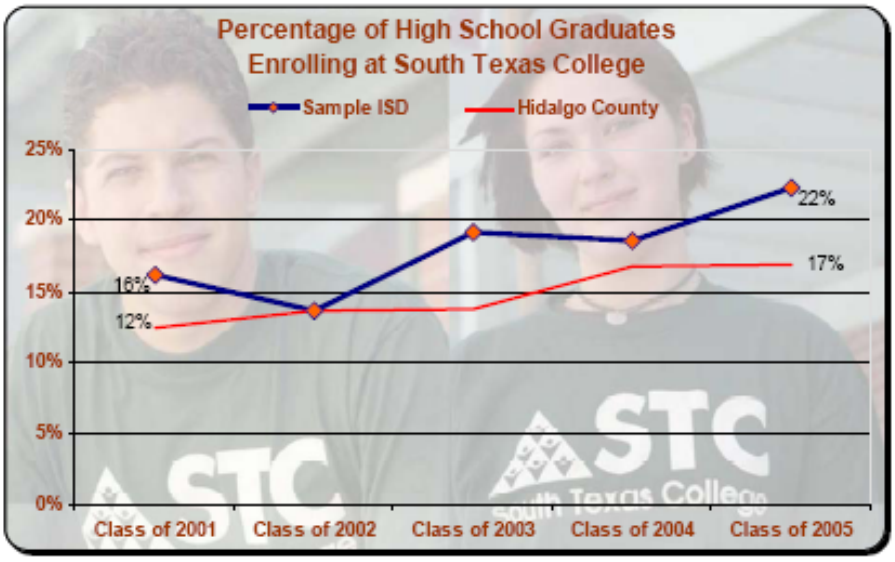
2006 Edition

**South Texas College Vision**

A better quality of life for our communities

**What's Inside:**

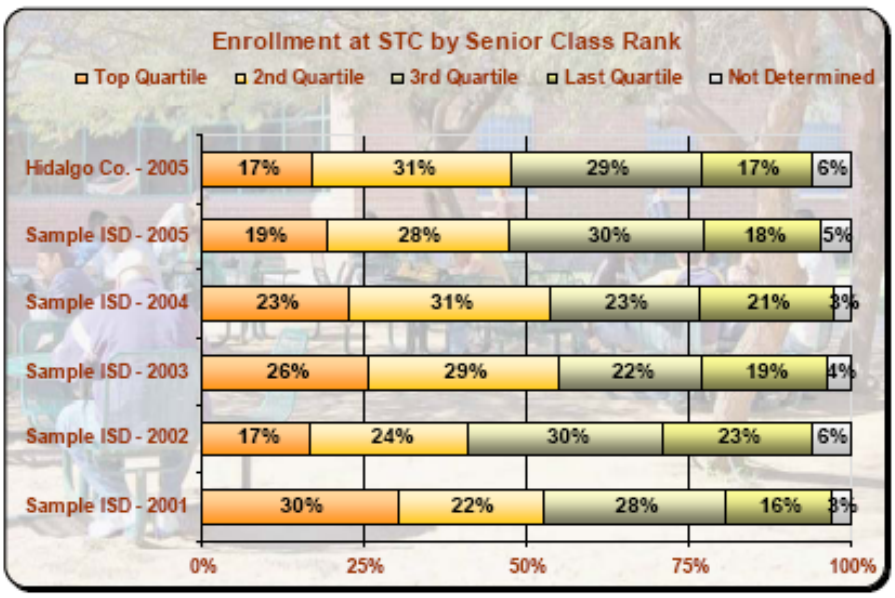
# Enrollment



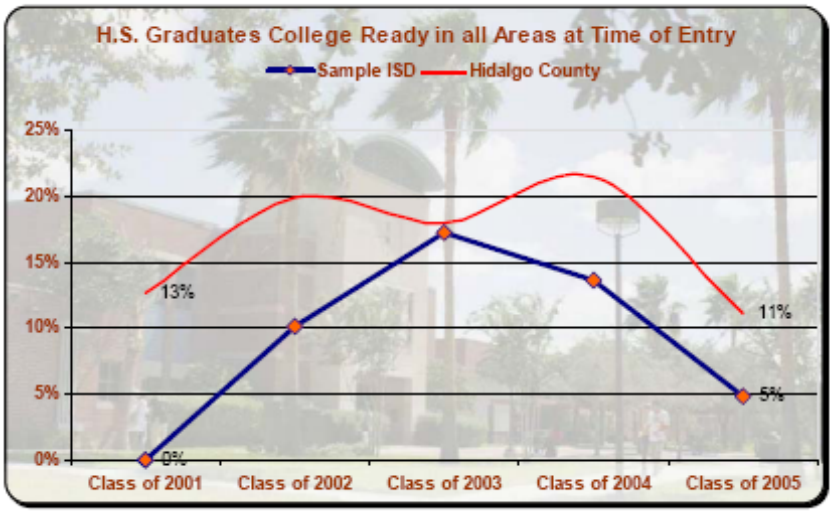

The percent of Hidalgo County high school graduates choosing to enroll at STC has increased by 5% over the last five years.

The percent of Hidalgo County high school graduates choosing to enroll at STC has increased by 5% over the last five years. The distribution of graduates across the percentile ranks of their graduating classes is fairly evenly spread with about 50% coming from the top two quartiles and 50% from the lower two quartiles. The high percentage of 3rd and 4th quartile students choosing to attend STC is both telling and significant.

This quartile distribution is not unique to STC. Such a distribution is common among community colleges, suggesting that students who choose to attend college come from all class quartiles. Therefore, It is critical that all high school students take the academic coursework necessary to gain the ability to read, write, and do math at a level of proficiency sufficient to enable them to succeed later in college.



# College Readiness



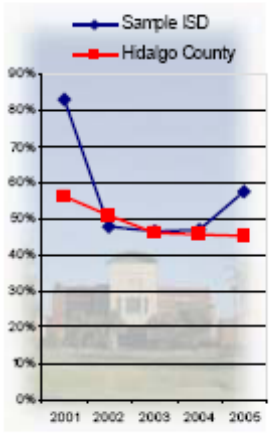

Texas law requires that all students meet minimum performance requirements in reading, writing and math before enrolling in college level coursework. A student meeting these minimum requirements is identified "College Ready". Students not meeting these minimum requirements are required to enroll in developmental courses to improve their proficiency levels.

Students may also take a State approved college readiness exam at STC. The percentage of "college ready" high school graduates enrolling in STC as determined by any one of these exams appears in the graph above.

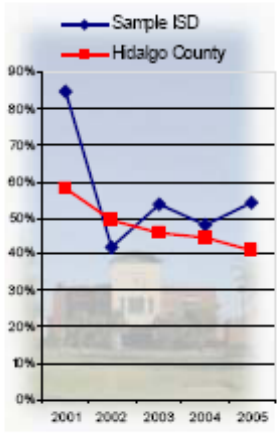
Students who take the college readiness exam at STC must pass the Reading, Writing, and Math sections of the exam to be considered "college ready". The pass rates appear in the graphs below.

## College Readiness Examination Results

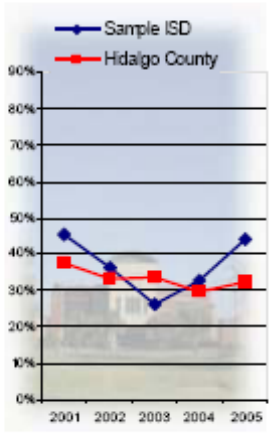
### Reading




### Writing

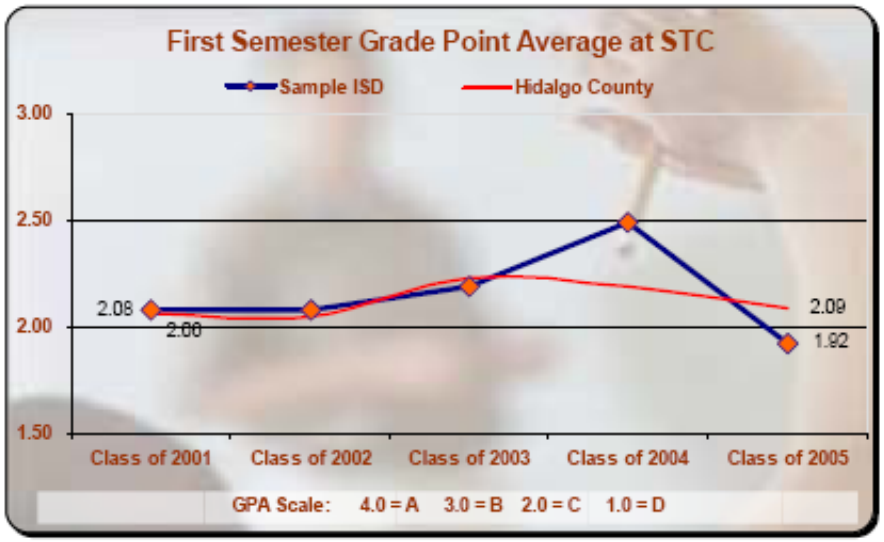



### Mathematics




**South Texas College is committed to increasing partnerships with public school districts to increase the number of college-ready high school graduates.**

# Student Performance

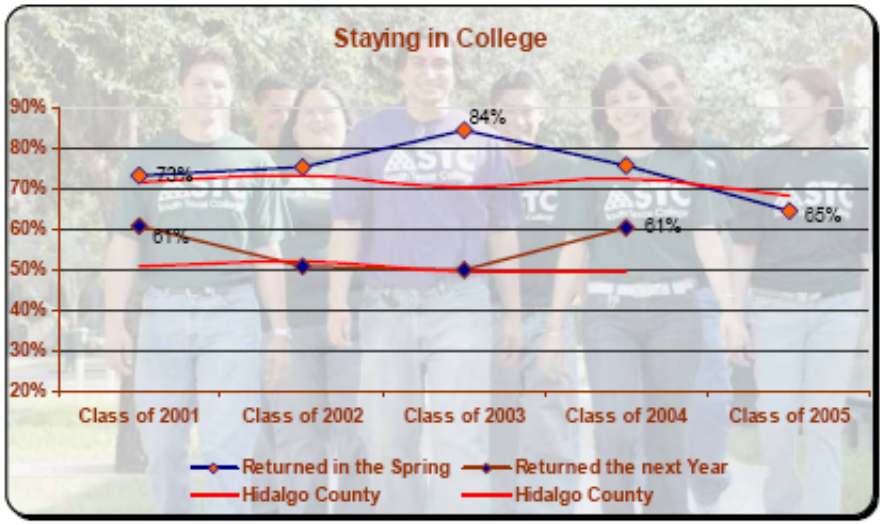



The first semester is the most difficult. Once high school graduates become adjusted to their new college environment, their STC grade point averages (GPA) tend to be similar to their high school GPA. One way to examine the impact of environmental change is through the first GPA.

Every high school graduate deserves the educational foundation to be successful in college. Together we can make that possible.

Student persistence is another critical success factor for college success. Financial pressures, conflicting priorities between school, work and home, and difficult transitions into the college environment are all primary contributors to students dropping out of college. Some students, however, do eventually return while others choose to enroll in only one full term per year as they struggle to meet family and financial obligations. Recent increases in the cost of living have had a detrimental impact on student persistence.

The data below is a clear indicator that more must be done to improve a student's chance at overcoming the barriers to consistent and continuing enrollment in college.



# APPENDIX B1 - STC COLLEGE READINESS PROJECT HIDALGO ISD

## Report of School District Visit
## Hidalgo ISD
## 10/23/06

Representatives from Hidalgo ISD: Dr. Daniel King, Superintendent
Mr. Eduardo Cancino, Asst. Superintendent
Mr. Edward Blaha, Principal, Hidalgo H.S.

Representatives from STC: Dr. Shirley Reed, President STC

Mr. Jose Cruz, Vice-President, Information Services and Planning

Mr. Wallace Johnson, Administrative Intern, Office of the President.

### Summary of Meeting:

Mr. Cruz reported the data contained in the *South Texas College 2006 College Readiness Report for Hidalgo ISD*. This report shows the number of students matriculating at STC from Hidalgo ISD has declined by almost one-half from 2004 to 2005. Hidalgo is 5 percentage points the county average in the percentage of their students who attend STC.

60 percent of Hidalgo ISD students who attend STC come from the middle two quartiles of class rank. Hidalgo ISD students are 1 percentage point below the county average for the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) measure of college readiness. Hidalgo ISD students are well above the county average in the reading, writing, and mathematics skill areas.

Mr. Blaha indicated that his high school staff would begin phone surveys of students to follow-up and try to determine why there was the sharp drop in the number of students matriculating at STC.

Hidalgo High School has an extensive dual enrollment program. There are 146 students in academic dual enrollment sections at the high school, and 39 students in technical dual enrollment sections in the areas of precision manufacturing, automotive technology, and HVAC. (This information needs to be verified in terms of duplication).

Dr. King suggested two areas where STC can help Hidalgo ISD in college readiness.

1. To help with the Early College 9th grade cohort STC can partner with the THEA Test Academies for students who are assessed as not college ready. Dr. King's goal is for 100 percent of this cohort to be college ready by the time they graduate in 2010. This is one way STC can play a bigger role in the Early College partnership.

2. STC can continue to expand dual enrollment in technical areas. Dr. King wants the school district to remain flexible to allow students who desire careers in high demand technical areas to have those options made available to them. (STC might consider offering sections in allied health areas in addition to the existing technical/vocational areas offered at the high school).

Dr. King and Mr. Cancino suggested that STC should try to disaggregate test results from the THEA test. This data analysis will allow curricular specialists and teachers at the high school to focus more specifically on skill areas where their students are deficient.

STC Developmental Studies faculty and leadership can play a role in faculty-to-faculty cooperation in this area.

# APPENDIX B2 - STC COLLEGE READINESS PROJECT MISSION CISD

## Report of School District Visit
## Mission CISD
## 10/24/06

Representative from Mission CISD: Mr. Oscar Rodriguez, Superintendent

Representatives from STC: Dr. Shirley Reed, President STC

Mr. Jose Cruz, Vice-President, Information Services and Planning

Mr. Wallace Johnson, Administrative Intern, Office of the President.

### Summary of Meeting:

Mr. Cruz presented the data from the STC College Readiness Report for Mission CISD. The data indicates 22 percent of Mission CISD high school graduates are coming to STC directly from high school. Mr. Rodriguez felt this number could be improved. He stated STC could have a 3 hour, more intensive outreach session at the high schools in the Mission ISD to complete applications, FAFSA, and provide STC staff with an opportunity to provide information on academic and technical programs available at the college.

Mr. Rodriguez expressed his desire to form a closer relationship with STC through career based academies; like "Tomorrows Teachers." This kind of cohort based program would involve more extensive outreach from STC to provide sustainable career mentorship with students in the Mission CISD as early as the 8$^{th}$ grade. This seems ideal for Teacher Prep, K-16 functionality, as well as a good fit with our existing articulation with UTPA. Career based outreach could be developed in other areas like criminal justice, allied health, natural sciences etc.

Another innovative idea presented by Mr. Rodriguez was the Reconnection Centers for high school drop-outs. Mission CISD makes a concerted effort to locate students who have dropped out of high school and offer them an opportunity to receive a high school diploma. This program is different from GED based Adult Education, as high schools in Texas cannot count GED recipients as graduates for purposes of state reporting. This a potential pool of untapped nontraditional students for STC. STC can give these adults an opportunity to go to college beyond their high school diploma.

Mr. Rodriguez expressed concerns about the alignment with STC and the academic calendar, and the rising costs of dual enrollment. He supports dual enrollment, however and favors the expansion of dual enrollment into technical areas.

# APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM

***IRB APPROVED ON:7/20/07***

Title: Understanding College Readiness and the Role of the Community College in South Texas: Listening to the Voices of Public School Leaders and Parents in Three School Districts

Conducted By: Wallace D. Johnson/ Educational Administration/CCLP/ Phone: (512) 471-7545
PI Phone Number: (956) 212-0730
Email: wallacejohnson0027@yahoo.com

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding to whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

**The purpose of this study is to learn more about community college/high school collaboration for college readiness for a potential population of students.**

**If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to do the following things:**

- **Attend meetings on the subject of college readiness.**
- **Reflect, both orally and in writing, on the outcomes of these meetings and steps taken to improve the college readiness of a potential population of community college students.**

**Total estimated time to be in this study is: Eight one hour meetings. One meeting will take place each week over an eight week period.**

**Risks associated with this study are minimal.** Some risks are unforeseeable. If you wish to discuss the information above or any risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the top of this form.

**There are no monetary, compensatory, or other tangible benefits associated with being in this study.**

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:** The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and study sponsors have the legal right to review these research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study the researcher will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw you participation call the researcher conducting the study. His name, phone number, and email is at the top of this page. If you have questions about your rights as a research

participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact Lisa Leiden, Ph.D., Chair of the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, (512) 471-8871 or email orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

**You will be given a copy for your records.**

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